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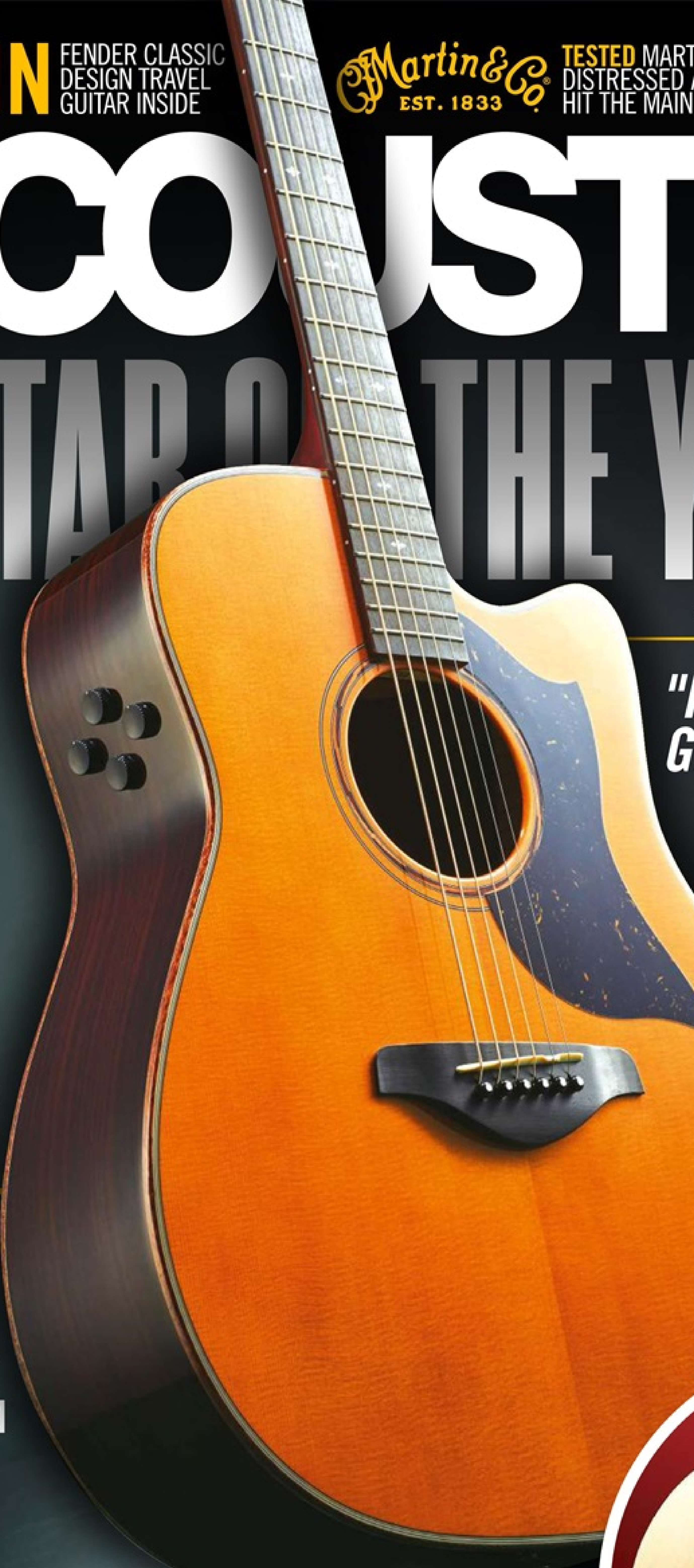

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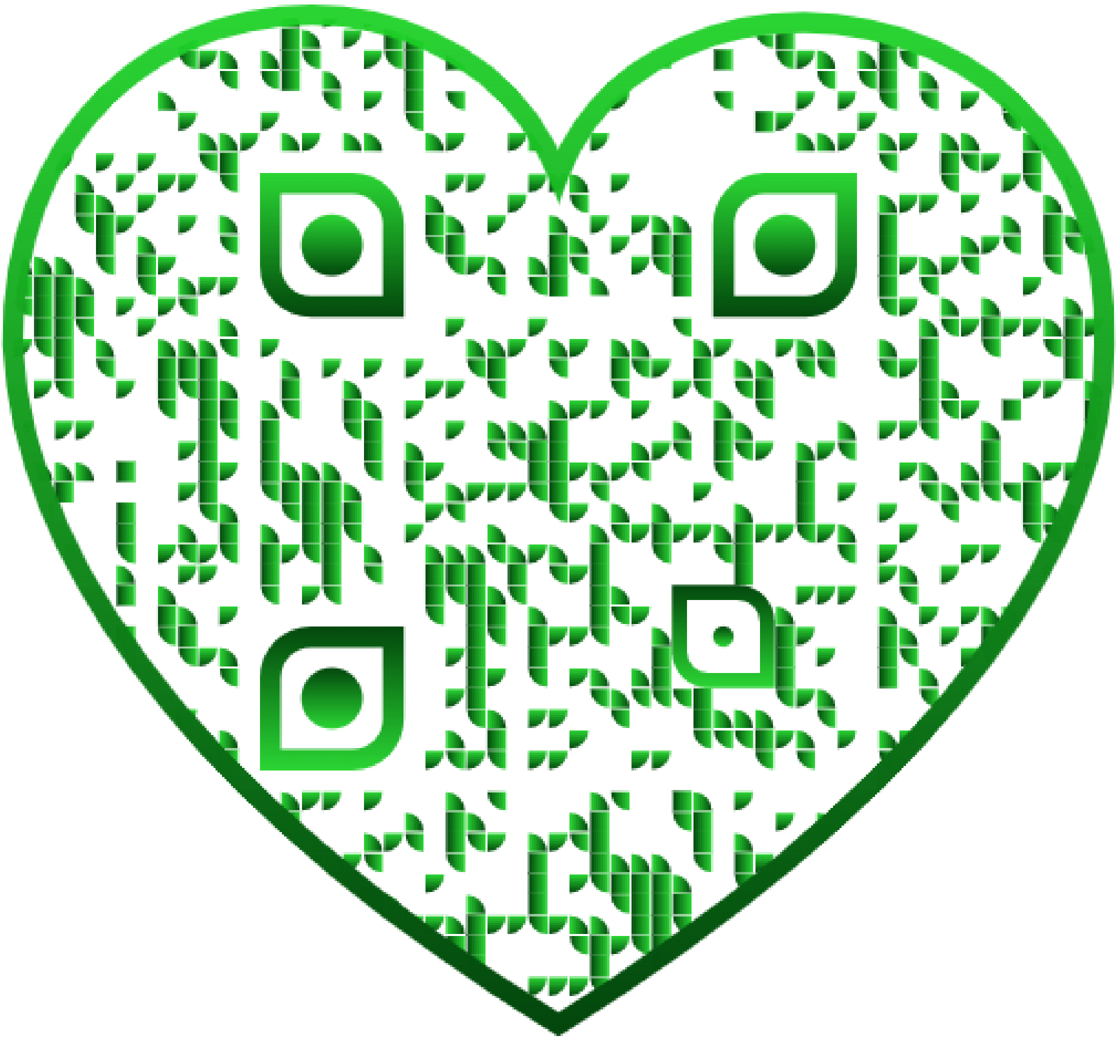

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Issue 138 December 2017

Editor: Dan Hobson
Managing editor: Kate Puttick
Art editor: Marcus Faint
Editor-in-chief, Music: Daniel Griffiths
Live photography: James Sheppard
Studio gear photography: Neil Godwin
Cover photograph: Neil Godwin
Columnists: Raymond Burley, Clive Carroll, Mike Dawes, Chris Eaton, Richard Gilewitz, Chris Gibbons, Gordon Giltrap, Daniel Ho, Leon Hunt, Thomas Leeb, Simon Mayor, Carl Orr, Chris Woods, Andy Pritchard

Writers: Bob Battersby, Stephen Bennett, Emily Bielby, George Henry King, Paul Brett, David Browne, Chris Eaton, Graham Hazelwood, Huw Hopkins, Andy Hughes, Glenn Kimpton, George Henry King, Alun Lower, Joel McIver, Ollie McGhie, Sean Reid, Alison Richter, Paul Strange, Sam Wise

CD reviews editor: Julian Piper
Gear consultant: Michael Astley Brown

Advertising: 01225 442244

Distributed in the UK by Marketforce (UK), 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU

Subscription rates: For all subscription offers and overseas prices visit www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk or telephone the subscriptions hotline on 0344 8482852.

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Non-executive chairman Peter Allen
Chief financial officer Penny Ladkin-Brand

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

THE ROOT NOTE

This is the December issue, which means it's time to send good tidings. Due to the nature of monthly magazine deadlines, I'll bid you all a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year in mid-November, then. Even the shops haven't gone into full festive mode yet!

Enough of all that guff, though. There are far more important matters at hand – Gear of the Year. The *Acoustic* team has trawled through every guitar review of the past year to bring you our top 20. You'll find every style of guitar in our coveted round-up – at every price point. We have, of course, crowned an overall winner. However, we thought it would be good to honour our best budget guitar too – an instrument which, at just £369, puts some guitars four times the price to shame. It's well worth a play if you haven't got four figures to spend on six strings. If you have, though, our winner truly is a beauty to behold. Enjoy!

GOTY doesn't mean we've ditched our usual gear reviews either. This issue, we road-test Martin's first widely available distressed acoustics, we get our fingers around Taylor's first guitar using new African tonewood, copafera, as an alternative to rosewood. We see if Fender can build a decent travel guitar with Fishman Presys preamp for just £345, we have a butchers at Hughes & Kettner's first acoustic amp, developed in conjunction with Michael Eisenmann, and put Guild's concert-shaped electro with DeArmond Tone Boss soundhole pickup through its paces.

Interview-wise, folk royalty Martin Carthy talks to us about the reissue of *Shearwater*, high-octane punk folksters Skinny Lister and audaciously-honest songwriter Beans on Toast talk about their Double Trouble tour together. We chat to Josh Ritter, an exceptional songwriter and storyteller who, if you haven't heard of, you definitely need to. Elsewhere, we speak to 80s legends A-Ha about their unplugged album and chat to new-kid-on-the-block, Brent Cobb.

Within these pages you'll find expert tuition from masters in the trade, amazing new music, a tribute to Paco de Lucía (who would have been 70 this month), vintage guitars, and just a little sprinkle of festivity. Have a great Christmas and enjoy the issue!

Dan Hobson
Editor

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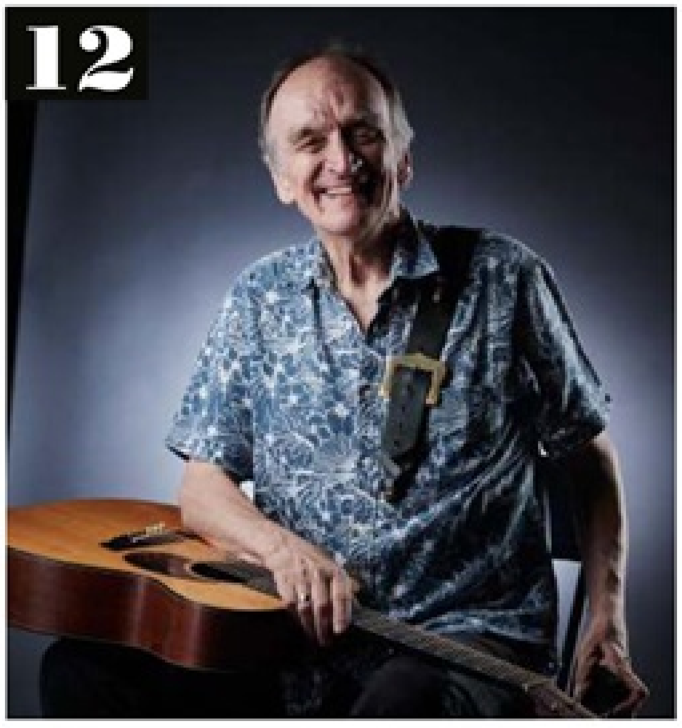

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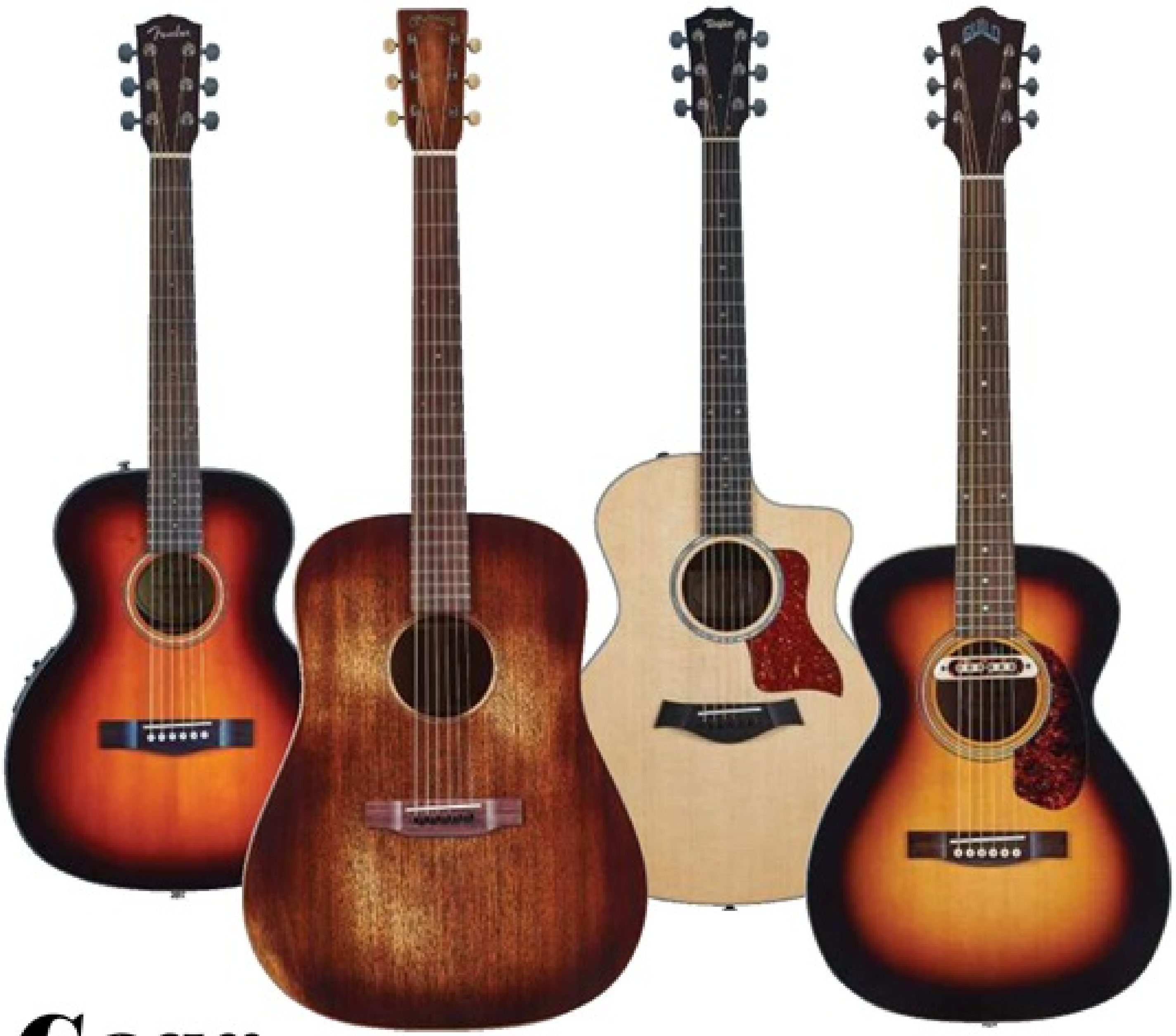

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GIBSON CLOSES FACTORY

Gibson is selling its iconic Memphis factory amid reports of poor sales.

The US guitar giant reassured locals that they will remain 'in the greater Memphis area', however. The facility, predominantly used to produce Gibson's semi-hollow and hollowbody instruments, is on the market for $17 million.

"A new facility will allow the company to improve the product quality, increase production capacity and potentially increase employment in the area," they said in a press release. "Gibson is seeking a buyer for the current location that will allow it to continue to operate in this location while building and leasing an appropriate facility in proximity to the current factory location."

Gibson CEO Henry Juszkiewicz said, "We are extremely excited about this next phase of growth that we believe will benefit both our employees, and the Memphis community. I remember when our property had abandoned buildings, and Beale Street was in decline. It is with great pride that I can see the development of this area with a basketball arena, hotels, and a resurgent pride in the musical heritage of the great city of Memphis."

He added: "We continue to love the Memphis community and hope to be a key contributor to its future when we move nearby to a more appropriate location for our manufacturing based business, allowing the world the benefit of our great American craftsmen."

© H Michael Miley

MARTIN SPONSORS 'THANK A TEACHER' PROGRAMME

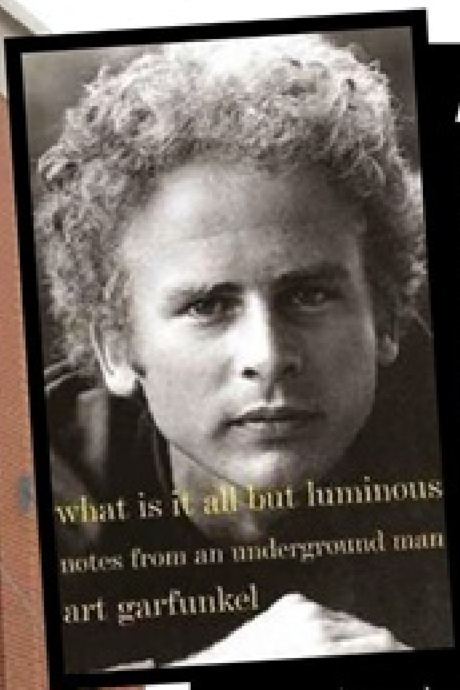
Martin Guitar have pledged to sponsor the VH1 Save The Music Foundation.

As part of a year-long celebration of 100 years of ukulele manufacturing, Martin Guitar provided the Foundation with ten ukuleles to be used by music educators in schools throughout the US as part of VH1 Save The Music's 'Thank a Music Teacher' programme.

Chris Thomas from C.F. Martin & Co. said: "Music is so important and it can have a very profound impact on a young person's quality of life. Every child should have access to music education and we are very proud to sponsor VH1's Save The Music Foundation."

Over the last 20 years, the foundation has donated $53 million worth of new musical instruments to more than 2000 US government-run schools.

Info: www.vh1savethemusic.org #SaveTheMusic.



ART GARFUNKEL MEMOIR

Christmas gift idea alert! While Garfunkel, strictly speaking, was more responsible for the harmony element of harmony-based guitar duo Simon and Garfunkel, we decided to include news of this new tome by folk-pop icon all the same, as the act's influence on acoustic playing is undisputable.

According to the press release, readers can expect in-depth discussion about "taking the world by storm, ruling the pop charts from the time he was 16, about not being a natural performer, but more a thinker... touring; sex-for-thrills on the road," and more.

What Is It All But Luminous (Notes From An Underground Man) is out now from Penguin Random House.

Info: https://goo.gl/AMt4cx

UNDER THE HAMMER - DYLAN & YOUNG ITEMS

A guitar played by Bob Dylan from the late 60s – including at George Harrison's iconic Concert for Bangladesh in 1971 – went up for auction last month.

Bids for the 1963 Martin D-28 reportedly started at a cool $300,000.

According to Larry Cragg (who was the star's guitar repairman and bought the acoustic from the singer in 1977 for $500 when he switched from Martins to Gibsons), it saw active service from the late 60s, including in that high-profile slot at Harrison's groundbreaking fundraiser, and on the Rolling Thunder Revue tour. "It has the same bridge pins, everything is just like it was when he had it: same case and everything, just like it was 40 years ago," said Cragg.

Info: https://goo.gl/n5Ehyf

Elsewhere in auction news, some of Neil Young's vintage guitars and recording gear, among 230 of his other personal items, will also go on sale this month. Proceeds will go to the Bridge School, a nonprofit centre for children with disabilities, a cause close to his heart as his son has cerebral palsy.

Young, 71, said, in a statement: "Collecting all of these items have been my great joy. They have provided a source of inspiration, fun and creativity throughout my life. Now it is time to share them with others in the world whom I hope will enjoy and love them as much as I have."

The auction will take place December 9 in Los Angeles, online and by phone.

Info: www.julienslive.com

EMMANUEL TO HOST HIS FIRST EURO GUITAR CAMP NEXT YEAR

Tommy Emmanuel has announced that he will host his first European Guitar Camp.

The four-day camp is to be held at Atholl Palace, Pitlochry, Scotland, from May 11-15, 2018, and will include activities, workshops, Q&As, and concerts, led by Emmanuel.

Emmanuel has also announced a duets album, *Accomplice One*. The album, which hits shelves on January 19, features Jason Isbell, Mark Knopfler, Ricky Skaggs, Rodney Crowell, Jerry Douglas, and Amanda Shires, plus more.

© Getty

FLEET FOXES ANNOUNCE UK TOUR AND EP

Fleet Foxes will play their first UK headline shows in six years this late November.

The band, whose self-titled debut made a big impact on the landscape of acoustic-based indie music, and topped numerous 'Best Of" lists, including *Rolling Stone*'s 100 Best Albums of the 2000's and *Pitchfork*'s 50 Best Albums of 2008, have also announced a special edition 10" EP. *The Electric Lady Session* will be available exclusively at independent record stores starting on Record Store Day's Black Friday, November 24 2017.

UK TOUR DATES

November 24 – Wolverhampton at Civic Hall
November 26-27 – London at O2 Academy Brixton (SOLD OUT)
November 28 – Bexhill at De La Warr Pavilion
November 29 – Southampton at O2 Guildhall

Info: www.nonesuch.com/on-tour/fleet-foxes

'BEST EVER' CORT

Cort has announced the newest of its "best-ever acoustic guitar family", the Gold A6. It boasts a solid Sitka spruce top featuring Cort's Aged to Vintage (ATV) torrefaction treatment, all-solid mahogany back and sides, a walnut-reinforced mahogany neck, plus a 45mm bone nut and saddle, with Macassar ebony fretboard and bridge pins, as well as a "sonically enhanced" UV finish. The X-bracing is hand-scalloped to lighten it, while the dovetail neck joint is reinforced with a bolt to produce what Cort calls a DoubleLock neck, enhancing resonance. Fishman's Flex Blend System is also onboard, pairing an under-saddle pickup with a condenser mic. RRP $1049. **Info: gold.cortguitars.com**

TEEN TROUBADOUR GETS SIGNATURE UKE

Fender have announced their youngest ever recipient of a signature model, 13-year-old pop sensation Grace VanderWaal.

Unveiling her Signature Ukulele series, America's Got Talent winner VanderWaal is one of a new generation of youngsters educated from a young age in how to use the instrument.

Andy Mooney, CEO of Fender said: "We look forward to working together to inspire future generations of players (including my daughter, an aspiring ukulele player)."

VanderWaal said: "Designing these ukuleles will be such a fun process and I hope my fans love them as much as I do. It's been a dream to have my own custom uke that I can share with my fans so others around the world can share the power of music and learn to play too!"

Info: shop.fender.com/en-GB

Win!

FENDER Classic Design Travel Guitar

With a short scale and compact size, this is the perfect guitar to bring wherever the music takes you. The travel body is derived from an auditorium shape that's been scaled down to 23.5" (597mm) for comfort and portability. A great choice for players of all ages and sizes, it's an exceptional choice for anybody looking to downsize.

FENDER CT-60S

SPECIFICATIONS

RRP: £168
Body Size: Travel
Top: Solid spruce
Back and Sides: Laminated mahogany
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Bridge: Rosewood
Scale Length: 597mm

TO BE IN WITH A CHANCE OF WINNING, SIMPLY TELL US OF **A TIME WHEN TRAVELLING HAS INSPIRED YOUR PLAYING OR SONGWRITING.** ALONG WITH YOUR ANSWERS, BE SURE TO INCLUDE YOUR...

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The competition is open to UK entrants only. Under 18s must obtain parental consent to enter this competition and be able to demonstrate this to *Acoustic Magazine*'s reasonable satisfaction. Answers must be received by 30/12/2017. One winner will be selected at random from all correct entries received and will be sent the prize free of charge. Each winner will be notified within 28 days of the closing date and will be required to give details of a delivery address in the UK to which the prize should be sent. For full terms and conditions, please go to http://www.futureplc.com/competition-rules/.

ASK THE EXPERTS

WANT TO BUILD A CAREER IN MUSIC? YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE SOLID FOUNDATIONS! THE MUSICIANS' UNION SHARE THEIR TOP TIPS...

The Musicians' Union represents musicians at every stage of their career. So whether you're new in the game or a seasoned pro, their top tips are essential. Read and learn!

HAVE A GOAL AND A PLAN

Knowing what you want to achieve and making a plan to get there puts you in a great position.

These days, most artists need to promote themselves to be successful and there is a huge amount you can do yourself. Create your identity, identify your target market, and work out the best ways to connect with them.

Gather contacts and network as much as possible. If music is to be your career, remember to act professionally in person and online.

If you have a project that needs some financial backing, check out your funding options and get planning. The MU has plenty of advice on applying for funding.

GET IT IN WRITING

Before engaging in any work as a musician it is vital to get what you are agreeing in writing.

We have a number of template contracts available online covering various areas of work, which we'd advise you to use when making these agreements. It is impossible to stress enough how important it is to confirm all terms of your agreement in writing as if an unpaid fee, cancellation or other issue occurs, it is much easier to recover the fee when you have. Proving a verbal agreement is extremely difficult – so always follow it up in writing.

REGISTER WITH PRS AND MCPS

If you are writing/composing music then you should look into joining PRS for Music (Performing Rights Society) and MCPS (Mechanical Copyright Protection Society), and registering your works with them. Both societies collect royalties for uses of your songs on your behalf and distribute them to you accordingly. PRS collect money for the broadcast and public performance of works. MCPS collects the licence fees due from the record company whenever registered music is reproduced for products such as CDs and digital downloads.

This additional source of royalty income is separate from the 'artist' royalty the record company is required to pay directly to the artists featured on the record under their recording contract. If the songwriter and the artist are the same person, then the record company will end up paying two different royalties to that particular member.

JOIN PPL

If you are a recording rights holder or are performing on recordings it is important to join the collection society PPL (Phonographic Performance Limited). Regardless of whether you are a session musician or featured artist, joining PPL is something you should be doing.

On behalf of its members, PPL collects royalties for a range of uses of recorded music – when it is played in public or broadcast on TV, radio and certain digital media services.

Those that own their recordings must register them with PPL in order for the collection society to be able to collect on their behalf for the range of uses mentioned.

JOIN THE MU

As a working musician, you should know what your rights are and how to protect them. That's where we come in, as the only trade union for musicians in the UK. The MU provide a wide range of benefits to members at all levels of their career. These range from advice/training to free instrument and public liability insurance, and legal advice. Joining the MU will allow you to avoid legal wrangles, provide help in getting the recognition you deserve and mean you are free from insurance worries. If you need help with a contract, self-releasing your work, copyright, royalties or even how to do your accounting. ■

For more information visit theMU.org

MARTIN CARTHY

With the reissue of Carthy's 1972 album, Shearwater, Glenn Kimpton met the stalwart to chat word-bending, angry purists and the mystery of amazing luthiery

It's a weekday morning and, between grandchildren duties and visits to the dentist, English folk evergreen Martin Carthy has found a bit of time to talk to us about folk music, starting with the re-release of his *Shearwater* album, a set very different to the big band Steeleye Span album *Please to See the King*, which he helped release the year before.

"Steeleye was the first electric band made up of folkies," Carthy explains. "Fairport moved into that area because they found it interesting and exciting. So they got Swarb [Dave Swarbrick, Steeleye fiddler] in to help them and Swarb was actually responsible for most of what went on *Liege and Leaf*. But when we all got together to do *Please to See The King*, it was very exciting because it was the first time most of us had actually plugged in."

In comparison, *Shearwater* is a spare album, featuring mainly just Carthy playing his acoustic and singing, and even some songs with just voice alone. The songs themselves are traditional and mostly of a dark shade, particularly 'Banks of Green Willow', a tragedy hewn from a George Butterworth orchestral piece telling the fate of a new mother and child. "Oh yes, well it's a folk album and all of the good songs are about horrible things," says Carthy, with a laugh. "There are a few jolly ones on there, though, which is lovely, because it balances out. But folk music takes life seriously, and I'm delighted that this one is still out there, because it means everything is being heard."

For most of us these days, the image one conjures of Martin Carthy is of the lone performer, stood firmly on stage with just the acoustic guitar to accompany him; the photos of him playing electric in a big band just seem a little unusual. "Well, none of it seemed unusual to me, to be honest," he says, after a moment. "But there are things on *Shearwater* that were rejected by Steeleye, so I did them myself. I wanted to do 'Lord Randall' with Steeleye, but Tim [Hart] rejected it because it was in 7/4, which is not what you usually find in English folk music; you can, but it's very rare. I got that version from a lad just outside of Edinburgh; it's a Scottish version of it that got turned into 7/4. He messed with it and put some of it in that time, so I just put the whole thing in it. I also borrowed a dulcimer to record it and played that part and then layered over the guitar."

Although Carthy has been seen playing many an instrument over the years, it's fair to say that the guitar is his tool of choice.

> **"It's a folk album... all of the good songs are about horrible things"**

"Well, Peggy Seeger has always been puzzled by the fact that people didn't really pick up on the banjo," he says. "They got the fact that the banjo changed its tuning all of the time, but very often preferred the sound of the guitar; I know I did. I was fascinated by the amount of tunings there were in mountain music in the States, there are bloody hundreds of 'em! In the early 60s, that's what me and my mates picked up on, but the person who made the breakthrough on guitar was Davey Graham, when he invented DADGAD. That really opened all sorts of doors, and what I've realised I've been aiming at all these years is to sing what I like to play. If I find a traditional tune that I like to play, I then want to sing the song. Or, if I find a tune that's appropriate, I'll bend the words around a little bit, or bend them round a lot..."

And not just the words for the tune: Carthy has also spent time tweaking his guitar strings to find the perfect tuning for his material and his voice. He started by taking 'Lovely Joan', a song he has now sung for nearly 60 years, and played around with the machineheads until he rested on his own CGCDGA tuning. "I came across it back in 1978. It derives directly from DADGAD and I wouldn't have found it without first having that tuning," he admits.

The guitar that, 39 years ago, Carthy sat up all night with in his lap finding his tuning on was his original 1959 Martin 000-18, an instrument he has now retired and replaced with his signature 000-18MC model. "It's got a slightly wider neck and that's about it, really," he says of the newer instrument. "But they have changed the way they build guitars. They seemed much sturdier back then and would take at least two years to play in, but then they would just go on improving, which was what happened to mine. But what else helped was that Stan Francis in Liverpool put a zero fret in for me, which is unheard of in Martins. There are purists out there who are outraged about that and feel that I have pissed on the author! They are so, so angry! I've had people tell me how beautiful the guitar sounds, and then walk away in disgust when they see the zero fret. But it improves the response, I say. So when they made my signature model, it was something the American craftsmen didn't understand. We had to send a picture of my old one over to show them how it's done. It's what you're used to, I guess."

As we know, Martin have been building guitars for many a year, but Carthy feels that there is a particularly fine vintage. "Oh, the guitars they built in 1931 were just astonishing," he enthuses. "The only word I

Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick performing at the EFDSS Festival in London in 1967

© Getty

can use is 'mystery'; how they could get that fretboard just right is a mystery shared by few people, and they achieved wonders in those days. Martin Simpson has a 1931 model [used on his new album] and it's just phenomenal; I mean, it cost him a fortune and he had to trade a few of his nice guitars in to get it – and he's got some nice ones." Several of Simpson's very nice guitars are his Private Stock PRS models, one of which he had sent to Carthy.

"It's an absolute beauty," he smiles. "I have used it out too; I started playing it on one tour when Swarb was still alive, and he said it's a fabulous guitar and he could hear it better than anything, but he told me not to use it anymore, because it didn't sound like me!"

We finish by touching upon another of Carthy's guitars, built by a luthier who is also a fan of the zero fret, Roger Bucknall of Fylde. "I got that one back in about '73 or '74," he remembers. "It's the first Falstaff he made, because he always swore he would never make a jumbo guitar.

"He made it in a fit of rage after people kept nagging him for one, and took a picture of it and said 'that looks like a fucking guitar!'. But when he finished it and polished it up, the back hadn't quite seasoned properly and there was a tiny little crack in the surface of the wood, so he slung it in the corner and wouldn't have anything to do with it.

"When I was looking for a second guitar I went to see him and picked up this Falstaff, but he didn't want to let me have it. I thought it was beautiful and, after he grumpily let me tune it how I like and play it, even he liked how it sounded and eventually let me have it. It's a wonderful guitar." ■

The reissued *Shearwater* is available now

Photographed in the original Martin factory, built in 1859.
A LEGEND RE-IMAGINED
"We have selected the finest features of the D-28 from both my grandfather's and my father's eras. We've brought forth this guitar's rich history and married it with modern innovations."
- Chris Martin IV, Chairman and CEO
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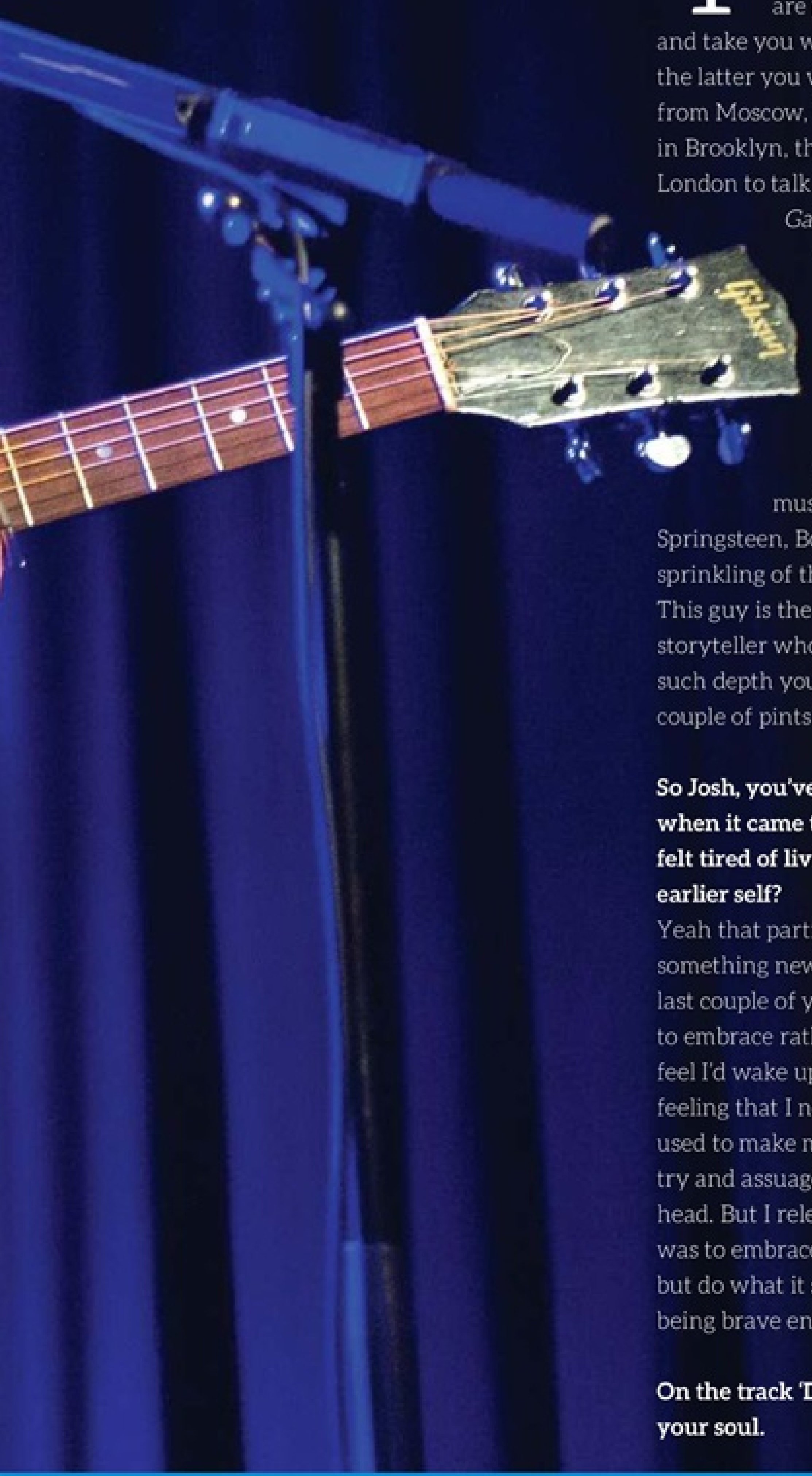
Getty Images

JOSH RITTER

Andy Pritchard shares a drink with the singer-songwriter, who some are calling America's greatest contemporary wordsmith



There are some writers out there who paddle around in the emotional shallows and some who are prepared to plunge the depths and take you with them. Numbered among the latter you will find Josh Ritter. Hailing from Moscow, Idaho, but now residing in Brooklyn, the 41-year-old met us in London to talk about his ninth studio album *Gathering*. For those unfamiliar with his work, this is a man who's been named in polls as one of the greatest living lyricists of his generation, with a musical style that echoes many of the iconic touchstones of American music. Guthrie, Paul Simon, Dylan, Springsteen, Bob Seger, maybe even a little sprinkling of the Irish with Van Morrison. This guy is the real deal, a modern-day storyteller who introduces us to characters of such depth you can feel their pain. So, with a couple of pints in place, we got down to it.

So Josh, you've said [in a recent essay] that when it came time to write *Gathering* you felt tired of living in the shadow of your earlier self?

Yeah that particular state of being wasn't something new to me, I've just realised in the last couple of years that it's something I need to embrace rather than run from. I used to feel I'd wake up in the morning just grinding, feeling that I needed to get something done. I used to make music in part to satisfy that. To try and assuage this weird monster inside my head. But I released that what I needed to do was to embrace it. In fact, not just embrace it but do what it says. So, this record was about being brave enough to let it out.

On the track 'Dreams' you particularly bare your soul.

I try and write as honestly as I can. I try to dissociate myself from it. I open up this hole in my mind and let the images fly through and describe them as they're going by, in a cold abject way. Later on, I might look back and think I wrote this song in a fever, but you can't let it hurt you.

There's some really strong characters on the album, for example in 'Showboat'. Where does the character end and you begin?

I've always tried to stay away from autobiography because I think it's less interesting than writing stories. In 'Showboat' the character's hubris is enormous but it's just a pinprick away from complete collapse. That's a really interesting place to write about. But I guess I've come to realise that in the end it's all autobiographical in some sense. It's all informed by our own personal experience.

In 'Showboat', 'Friend of Mine' and 'Feels Like Lightning', there's a wonderful retro feel, like on early Johnny Cash. Was that something you aimed for?

No that's something that just happened working with my band, who are an amazingly talented bunch of guys. I recorded the songs really randomly but when I was putting the album together it felt right to start with those tracks – 1, 2, 3 – to kinda launch into the record. I'm not going to start with something introspective. Let's have a party first before we get into the hard nugget at the centre.

Your songs carry a lot of Christian imagery.

Yeah, I was raised in Christian home but I wouldn't call myself a conventional believer now. Those words and those stories are so deeply ingrained, I find that in our culture today they are a language that many of us can speak and understand. When you're

a songwriter you have to be concise, but a symbol or a character can speak volumes, when you already know a little of their story.

Words like salvation and redemption are laden with meaning. Your duet with Bob Weir 'When Will I Be Changed' is a redemption song if ever there was one!
Yeah, I wanted that song, especially in the light of the way the world is, to be about hopefully rising to the occasion. You know, these days are any of us strong enough to do the right thing when the situation requires it?

My favourite track is 'Thunderbolts Goodnight' – a beautiful love song. Can you tell us the story behind it?
I feel like making a record is like going to a party, you want to be there, but you don't want to be there too long. As I was pulling all the songs together I noticed I had all these big talkers. 'Showboat' was one and the character refers to himself as 'Old King Thunderbolt'. I thought it would be kinda cool to show the softer, more vulnerable side of the same person.

There's that line in there "I thought the sun was going down but the sun was coming up". That's great imagery, one's an end one's a beginning.
Yeah, there used to be times before I was happily in a relationship when I'd think what will become of me, not realising that all the time I was heading towards the good stuff.

I see from your videos that you use a Gibson J45. Is that your trusty steed?
I went and got two new (Gibson) J45's. I love those guitars, they're sturdy, they hold up with a thumpy low end I really enjoy. You pick them up and they don't feel fragile, they're workhorses. In fact, I have two of them. I had two, Sunburst and Goldie, that had been around the world with me for over a decade. They were battered and worn. There was blood on them from moments of abandon. They had been sweated over, spilled on, thrashed and repaired. They were my trusty war-horses, my cherished friends. But, the time had come to turn them to better use so I decided to auction them both in order to support causes that I believe in. The money raised went to the ACLU Nationwide and Planned Parenthood.

How much did you raise?
It was $20,000 dollars. Then I went out and got two new J45's. I love those guitars, they're sturdy, they hold up with a thumpy low end I really enjoy. You pick them up and they don't feel fragile, they're workhorses.

© Laura Wilson

"My two Gibsons have been sweated over, spilled on, thrashed and repaired"

What pickups do you have on them?
LR Baggs. It's nice to be able to mix between the mic and the pickup (LR Baggs Anthem).

For the album, I read that you recorded 30 songs in two weeks! That's what I call fast work!
Yeah, we worked fast and my band are really used to working together. I let them take the reins more on this album, which was really fun because they're all super creative guys. I wanted to record all the songs, then be left with this create hunk of marble to create the album out of.

So how do you go about getting from 30 tracks down to 13?
I feel like making a record is like going to a party, you want to be there, but you don't want to be there too long, to outstay your welcome. Thirty is a lot, but the core songs pretty much jumped out to me very obviously as the ones that needed to live together.

You're returning to these shores for a gig at The Shepherds Bush Empire on 5 December. How long a set can your fans look forward to?
Well we normally play for two hours. In terms of word-soaked songs that's a lot to take in for anybody.

So that must be about a million words! How do you remember them all?
I used to forget the words a lot more but as time's gone by I've grown less concerned with exactly what's happening in the audience and more concerned with exactly how I present the songs to them. So ironically, as my songs have got wordier my memory has got better. ■

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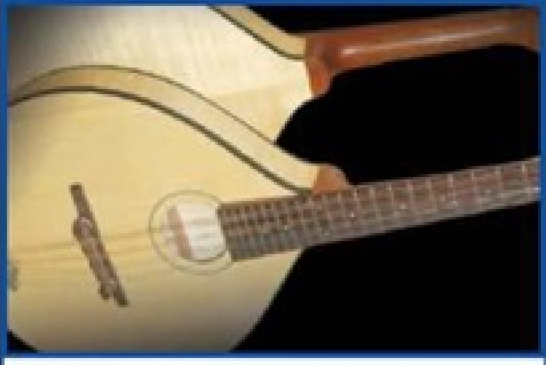

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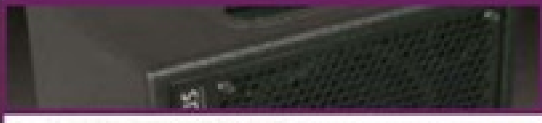

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BEANS ON TOAST

Folk songs about drink, drugs, love, sex, politics, and optimism have ensured a strong cult following for Beans on Toast, and album nine won't disappoint...

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

Beans On Toast – aka Jay McAllister – is a songwriter who isn't afraid to speak his mind. The self-proclaimed "drunk folk" singer's ninth album, *Cushty*, to be released on December 1 – his birthday and yearly record release date – doesn't veer from the endearingly honest style which has earned a devoted cult following.

With songs about potential Armageddon, Brexit, love, drinking, drugs, lying politicians, the end of Secret Garden Party, immigration, England, evolution, and a whole lot of humour, the album really is Beans at his best; disillusioned yet optimistic social commentary which never takes life too seriously.

Beans took to folk music in around 2005 after a few years of partying, promoting gigs in London and writing tunes for a band that never came to fruition. He emerged with debut album Standing on a Chair in 2009. Produced by Ben Lovett of Mumford & Sons – and featuring appearances from Frank Turner, Emmy The Great, members of the Holloways, and more – the release cemented Beans as a key member of the London folk scene.

Since then, Beans has played shows around the globe, supported the likes of Frank Turner (a long-term friend and collaborator), Kate Nash, and Flogging Molly, played countless Glastonbury Festivals and, crucially, has always had a laugh doing it. To mark the release of *Cushty*, Beans is heading on a joint UK tour this month with folk-rockers and Xtra Mile label mates Skinny Lister [interview p22]. The tour, dubbed Double Trouble, promises to be just that.

Are you happy with the album?

Very much so, yeah. I rounded up a little gang of musicians and we went to a studio in the Welsh countryside to record it. Worked out well.

You explored lots of themes on the record. Tell me about the inspiration behind it?

Each song has its own theme. But it's a mixture between talking about the sorry political landscape and how you still have to enjoy life. I suppose if the album's going to be about anything, it's that: if there is any way out of this sad political landscape, then love is the answer. True love.

In some songs it does sound like you're more worried about things than previously...

No. It's against my beliefs to worry. You can try and change things and be concerned, but worrying won't fix anything. The world's a stranger place than it was when I started and there's more of that to comment on, rather than, "Hey, we're all at a party, let's get hammered".

Are you ever nervous about topics you cover when you sing?

I never feel the need to censor myself. There's no point in writing songs that you're not willing to stand by. I don't see any of my music as controversial, I'm not trying to rub anyone up the wrong way, but I'm always happy to speak my mind.

With the current state of the world, do you think folk music is more relevant than ever?

Years ago, people used to say 'nobody sings about politics, there are no protest singers'. Now musicians and artists are standing up across the board because the establishment has turned into such a monster that nobody agrees with.

You'll be touring with Skinny Lister next month. Tell us about that...

We have a beautiful relationship and have toured and played gigs for years. I get on so well with them, it's almost like family. We've done tours where we've both been opening, generally for Frank Turner, we've done tours in different countries. We've always had so much fun on the road, we just decided to sort something in the UK. It's a co-headline tour and by doing that we can move into bigger venues than we would normally play. It's a good evening of entertainment. I'll be taking the full band I did the record with on tour, which includes Max from Skinny Lister on accordion.

What do you like most about touring?

Touring is something I've always loved. I prefer touring to going on holiday. If you visit a new city and you're not playing a gig, and you don't have a mate in town, you'll be looking at Lonely Planet or Google Maps for where you'll be drinking that night. On tour, it comes with a built-in thing to do that evening – play a gig. But through that, you've got built-in mates; the crowd, promoter, other bands. The friendship

the band. When all that went to shit I started promoting clubs and putting on gigs; all the stuff you do in a band without actually playing just because I liked all the drink and drugs. But I was always writing. I was living in a pub, Nambucca on Holloway Road, running the shows and putting on all the parties, and I'd sometimes get up and play between bands or if somebody didn't show up. I had a catalogue of songs building up and always thought I'd start another band.

Then I went to Glastonbury one year and there was an open mic stage and I got up and did a few of those tunes. After I'd finished the first song I was like "Fuck me, I don't even need a band." It was very much preaching to the converted because the songs were about hammered people in a field, but it struck a chord, I guess. Then I booked another gig after that, played more at Nambucca, then realised how easy it is to do it by yourself. Even then, one gig just led to another, I didn't really think of recording. It was just pub music – play to get a few free beers.

Then Frank Turner started playing at Nambucca, Kate Nash took us on tour. After a few tours, I was like "This is kinda legit". I never really pushed it, though. The second or third time I toured with Frank, it was a big tour, and Xtra Mile Recordings, Frank's label, came to us and said "Do you want to do a record, just to sell on the road?" and I was like "Yeah". So I sat down and recorded my 50 songs, which turned into the first album. And then, things just continued.

What's been the highlight of your career so far?
My show on Avalon Stage at Glastonbury last year. From that seed where it all started at Glastonbury to the Glasto show I'd always dreamed of; people bursting out of the tent and a really good vibe. But I treat every show with as much love respect as that. Maybe the highlight is gonna be tonight's show in Nottingham.

"I got a 'play three chords' book and I've been playing those ever since"

you get from being a touring musician is unrivalled to any other profession. Even when I was starting out, strangers would let you crash at their house, make you a cup of tea in the morning and give you a lift to the train station.

Is there anything you don't like about the road?
Err, not really.

What gear do you use for the live shows?
My guitar, Martin, is the only guitar I've ever had for Beans on Toast. It is a trustworthy beast. I've played every gig with it and Martin's never let me down. It looks battered but it's not. It's a Martin LX1E.

How did you first get into playing the guitar?
Me and my mates started a band at school before we actually had any instruments. We just told everybody we were in a band and I graffitied the name around school. It was like a three-piece grunge band. After that, I got this 'play all these songs with three chords' book and I've been playing those chords ever since.

When did you turn your focus to acoustic and folk music?
Well, a bit later I got into Beck and all his country stuff. My dad was always a huge country fan: Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, Jon Pryor, Guy Clark, stuff like that. With my tail between my legs, I went back to my dad and borrowed all the records I used to laugh at.

When did Beans On Toast first come into being?
Well, we moved from Essex to London with

Tell me about the songwriting process for you?
I'll have ideas bashing around in my head. Then all I need to write songs is peace and quiet in a place nobody else can hear me. Bit of privacy and a spliff, I'll write you a couple of songs.

Anyone floating your boat right now?
There's a country band Turnpike Troubadours, whose album is coming soon. New Ian Felice album is good. There's a guy called Slaid Cleaves who I really like. He's got a new album out called *Ghost on the Car Radio*, which is great.

Finally, any hot player tips for readers?
If you put the capo on a different fret, nobody will know it's the same chords [laughs]. ■

***Cushty* is out on December 1 through Xtra Mile Recordings.**

SKINNY LISTER

When this punk-folk six-piece started out, their main goal was to get into festivals for free. Eight years on, they're taking the world by storm

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

Skinny Lister are a high-octane punk-folk band that has been raising hell since 2009. The rum-soaked six-piece make no bones about loving what they do – and it is truly infectious.

In 2016, they released third album *The Devil, The Heart & The Fight*, earning them an army of devoted fans. While the record had slightly more mainstream gloss than previous offerings, the band maintained their rough punky edge – and it worked. They have just re-released the record with new tracks to boot. For anyone who missed the first record, there's certainly plenty of bang for the buck.

It's perhaps performing live where Skinny Lister come into their own, though. With raucous, sweaty, booze-fuelled shows the punk edge shines proudly amid skillful guitars, harmonies and stunning folk melodies.

The band formed in 2009 after the early members met in London folk clubs. One of the hardest working bands on the scene, they gigged hard around the UK until signing with Xtra Mile Recordings in 2014. Since then, they've joined label-mate Frank Turner on huge UK and US tours, played the Vans Warped Tour in the States, and joined the notorious Salty Dog Cruise.

In December, Skinny Lister – comprising member Lorna Thomas (vocals), Dan Hepinstall (lead vocals and guitar), Max Thomas (accordion, mandolin and vocals), Sam Brace (electric guitar, concertina, and vocals), Tom Mills (drums), and Scott Milsom (bass) – will be joining Beans On Toast [interview p20] on the Double Trouble tour.

Acoustic caught up with singer Lorna and songwriter Dan ahead of the tour and release.

So you're on tour with Beans on Toast in December. Are you excited?

Yes! We're doing three weeks in Europe first, though, on Skinny Lister's biggest headline tour over there yet, which Beans On Toast is supporting us on. So that's exciting. Then we have a week off before the Double Trouble tour begins with, also Beans On Toast.

Jay's told us how much he enjoys hitting the road with you guys...

He's great fun, we love his music and what he stands for. Xtra Mile is all about community and family. Jay's a top bloke. He likes a drink, we like a drink, we get on.

What do you like most about touring?

You avoid bin day and washing-up [laughs]. I love the camaraderie of being on the road with the band, mates like Jay, the crowds, the parties, it's amazing.

What do you find the hardest?

It's tiring getting to bed at 3am every night and

it can be a long wait between soundcheck and playing. But as soon as you walk on stage, you spring into life again.

What's been your best band experience so far?
It has to be last year when we went on the Flogging Molly tour – on a cruise boat. We were setting off from Miami, going round the Bahamas, with a free bar – and getting paid for it. We've had loads of really obscure experiences but that was totally surreal. It was amazing because there were so many friends there: Frank Turner, Beans On Toast, Will Varley, Larry And His Flask, Flogging Molly Crazy times! My brother [Dan] and I started out playing music in our front room and I never dreamed it would take us as far and wide as it has done. I joined a band to get into festivals for free.

So you've just re-released third album *The Devil, The Heart & The Fight.* What new additions can we expect?
The deluxe bonus disc has two new recorded songs, including a Xmas song, which we're really excited about. It has an acoustic performance from Dan of 'Boy Ashore', a song about a Hastings fishing community, as well as a few other sessions. There are some live tracks too, because a lot of our followers always ask to get some live stuff recorded. We've got some tracks from when we performed at the Round House for Frank Turner's Lost Evenings Festival and we have some from our headline show at Scala, London. And we talk about them as well, give everyone an insight into who we are.

Yeah, that was an interesting touch...
I think it's good to give some explanations. There are some other strange things on there too, like the bootleg stuff. We have a fan who has recorded every show he ever went to. We appreciate his appreciation and rather than getting cross about a bootleg we thought "sod it, let's put it on an album and make a thing about it". You need to explain things like that, though.

Any more release plans on the horizon?
We were in the studio this week actually. We're working on new tracks, which we're really excited about. Hopefully we'll be playing some new tracks on the next few tours to test how they go down.

Tell us about the songwriting process...
It usually starts with Dan when he's in a quiet place, rather than on the road. He comes up with lyrics and a melody. He then sends it out to everyone to have a listen and think about their parts. Then we get together, hash them out. Sometimes it's really hard work and we can't agree on things. Other times, it's smooth. On Thursday it was easy and we played four new songs, which is great.

If you had any advice to aspiring musicians reading, what would it be?
When it comes to playing shows, it doesn't matter how big or small the gig is – you never know who is going to be in the crowd. For example, we picked up our American label because we were busking in the street and some guy saw us and that was that – seven weeks on the Warped Tour playing on the main stage at peak times. If you really have fun with it and treat every gig like it's your most important show, you can't go wrong. If you look like you care and you're getting a lot out of it, that's infectious. And even now we treat every gig like it's the last gig. ■

***The Devil, The Heart & The Fight* is out now on Xtra Mile Recordings.**
Info: www.skinnylister.com

GEARBOX

Songwriter and guitarist Dan Hepinstall talks instruments, inspiration and advice...

I only ever use an acoustic guitar for live shows, a Tacoma DM10. I've had that about 10 years, it's my workhorse guitar. It's been around the world with us and it's pretty battered, covered in cracks, but it still does the job. When we go into the studio to record, even though we take in a dozen guitars to pick from, it's usually this one the producer chooses. It's got a very balanced sound. And it's very comfortable playing, because I've had it so long. It's got a Fishman under-saddle pick-up fitted. So much sweat gets in there on some gigs, it sometimes dies. I've been through a few. I went through that many that our management contacted Fishman and I've got an endorsement. But, yeah, they do the job well and you can't see them which I like. For pedals, all I use is a tuner. I'm a quick set-up!

I did treat myself to was a Lowden O35. It's very loud and I use it for fingerpicking style songs. If I use it for Skinny stuff the volume rips your head off. That's the one I spent a bit of money on so that one won't be going on the road. It's too nice. I also got an Alaverz MD65 through an endorsement, which is pretty solid, it's doing a good job.

I first got into playing guitar after listening to the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly. The main appeal was that there were three chords. The first guitar I could buy was a copy of the one the Everley Brothers play. An Epiphone copy of the J-200. For quite a while I was into electric guitar and mainly used a Fender Jaguar. And when Skinny started I rediscovered the acoustic. I've always written on acoustic.

A recent influence on guitar is James Yorkston, I've picked up a few things from him. I've spent a lot of time in folk clubs over the years, always watching some of the better guitarists. I also did classical guitar lessons when I was little and that stood me in reasonable stead in terms of where to put your fingers. I've seen other guitarists get into bad habits which limits the further down the path.

I spent a lot of time playing guitar in my formative time. I don't think any of that goes to waste. But then, always enjoy it and find something that inspires you. ■

BRENT COBB

Singer-songwriter Brent Cobb is branching out into the wider world of country music. With a new album in the works, Hywel Davies gets the lowdown on the rising star

You would be hard-pressed to find a singer/songwriter who sounds as organic as Brent Cobb in the country scene today. The Georgia-born guitarist wears his roots on his sleeve - having been born and brought up in a family that breathes music. Call it fate or coincidence: either way it would seem that Cobb was put on this planet to make music.

Having garnered critical attention with his 2016 debut album *Shine On Rainy Day*, he's been a breath of fresh air for the country music scene with storied songs to take you on a journey into the heart of Americana. Influenced heavily by his father [Patrick Cobb], also a guitarist, his upbringing has always been centred around guitars, with some of his earliest memories relating back to the instrument.

"I've grown up around music all my life," he reminisces. "I remember when I was two-years-old, we had this red Squier with an old Fender amp that I used to plug into. Before I could play, I would set the guitar down on the floor and I would just tap the strings, just making sounds like a spaceship or something, I didn't even know how to play it, I didn't really have the desire to want to learn, I just liked making noises.

"My daddy is much more of an entertainer than I am. He always played the guitar but he's more than that. He's just a real sincere, genuine musician and artist who's good at talking to people and telling stories. I think that translated to me as it made me into a songwriter. Because of him I got my first chance to perform on the stage at the American Legion Hall in Richland, Georgia. He invited me along and I wanted to play this Tim McGraw song: 'Don't Take The Girl'. So, I got up there at seven years old and there's a line in there that goes: 'Johnny hit his knees [and there he prayed].' When that line came up, I went down and hit my knees on stage. I stole the show right there."

Does he remember his first guitar, we wonder? "It was an Ovation Celebrity semi-acoustic guitar, which I still have. It needs some work done on it, but I love that thing: it has a lot of soul. It has that round back to it like the kind of guitar that Glen Campbell played. I've got a Taylor and a Martin, but lately I've been playing a Gibson L-00, a little six-stringed parlour guitar. I gravitate towards those small-bodied guitars because they're kind of warm and I just really like them."

Cobb's humble blue-collar sound takes inspiration from the moment that he's in. His laid-back playing style is the key to unlocking all those rich tunes that reside within his mind. What's his secret, *Acoustic* asks? "I usually just pick up the guitar and start writing. Most of the time I wouldn't even know I'd be writing a song at all. I get inspired by a melody that I play on the guitar which inspires my lyrics and it all works together. If it was a windy day in the fall, I'll sit on the porch with my guitar and try to play the way the wind would make me feel. I believe in the magic and aura of music. I know this sounds silly, but when I was a kid I would try to manipulate the weather with my playing, just trying to influence the weather."

He adds: "I believe that if there's an absolute universal language, I think we could all agree it's music. I think one of the most important things to remember being a songwriter is to always know your own voice, what sounds the most natural and most real thing that your spirit would say. Always do it in a way that's so you and so truthfully you that no one could ever mistake it."

It's hard enough to put into words one's own style of playing, but Cobb keeps it simple as he describes what kind of guitarist he really is.

"I play like myself and it was John Prine who had a funny quote about how everybody was praising him for the way he plays, this beautiful way that he played, and he said, 'Well, that's what happens when you make a mistake so many times, it turns into your own thing.' I feel the same way about the way I play too. I don't really know technically how to play, I'm just myself."

Currently in the final stages of polishing off his sophomore album, Cobb released the first single back in September: 'Ain't A Road Too Long.' Treading further into Southern rock territory it feels like a natural, livelier

progression for him. With an opening that has one particularly delicious fingerpicked riff, it's those unmistakable Southern vocals that give him an uncanny authenticity.

"To me it's funny because I've always said that people in rural America have a real rhythm to the way that they talk; it almost sounds like rapping. If you went to Bonnie's Bait and Tackle in Richland, Georgia, there would be a guy out there called Jackie Witt and he's this bad ass old dude who's just got this rhythm to the way he talks and I really wanted to capture that. I also wanted to put in a little more energy and a little more of what I'm playing live into this record because I don't want to put people to sleep out there."

For this follow-up, Cobb worked alongside renowned producer – and cousin – Dave Cobb. Though the two grew up in the same state they never once met each other until later on in life. Time may have separated them but music certainly brought them together, as Cobb explains: "We didn't grow up together at all and we didn't really meet until I was 17 or 18. We met at his grandmother's funeral in Georgia and I heard he was a record producer in LA. I asked him what did he produce? He

"I believe in the magic and aura of music"

told me Shooter Jennings' *Put The 'O' Back In Country*, which was one of my favourite albums at that time. I couldn't believe it, so I gave him my acoustic demo with a few songs on it. He heard it and a couple of days later he shot me a line down the phone and wanted to fly me to LA to record my first album. That changed my whole adult life right there."

"So, I went to LA and from the moment I stepped into that studio, I realised that he produces the same way that I write. He was very natural, impulsive and has an instinctual way of doing things. Dave just tries to do exactly what he's inspired to do, which is the same way that I write. It's so weird to have not grown up together because we're very similar. Deep down there's a natural similarity that I can't quite put my finger on. It's been a blessing getting back together for this record and it's definitely been a blessing to do." ■

Cobb's next album is due early next year. Info: www.brentcobbmusic.com

MERRY ACOUSTIC CHRISTMAS

Andy Pritchard takes a wistful sleigh ride through the world of acoustic Christmas songs

Get ready, folks, the seasonal retail blitzkrieg (aka Christmas) is looming. By the time this is published, you will have already, no doubt, been assailed by Noddy Holder declaring "It's Christmas!" upon entering any department store, while Roy Wood, saxophones to fore, will "Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday". If you stay an hour or so, you'll hear them again and again, trapped in an endless tacky time loop. Poor staff.

Not that I mind these classics. In fact, back in their heyday, I loved them. But, man, talk about overkill. I remember chatting to Roy Wood years ago and he told me how that song was his pension fund. Imagine the number of plays it must get each year. Every store, every radio station, every Christmas album – utterly mind-blowing.

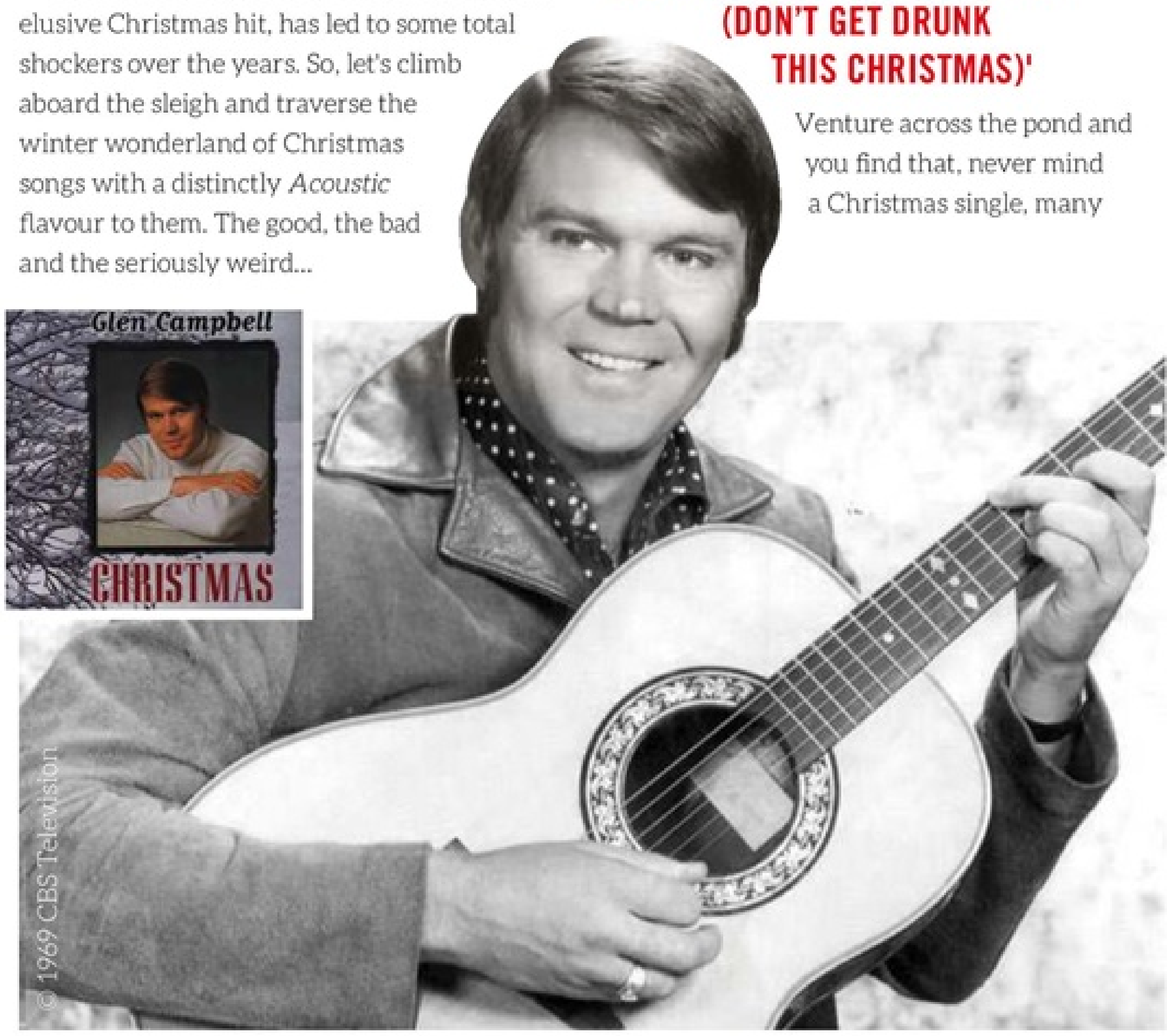
Herein lies the problem. The pursuit of that elusive Christmas hit, has led to some total shockers over the years. So, let's climb aboard the sleigh and traverse the winter wonderland of Christmas songs with a distinctly *Acoustic* flavour to them. The good, the bad and the seriously weird...

GREG LAKE: 'I BELIEVE IN FATHER CHRISTMAS'

The first song the came to mind was Greg Lake's 'I Believe in Father Christmas'. A hit in 1975 it got as far as No. 2 in the UK charts, being held off the top spot by, of all things, 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Thought by many to be an anti-religious song, Lake himself said it was a protest at the commercialism of Christmas while the lyricist Peter Sinfield said it was about a loss of innocence and childhood belief. It has, of course, become a perennial classic albeit one with darker edges. The acoustic guitars, tuned to drop D, suggest a childlike optimism while a bombastic excerpt from 'Troika' alludes to the corporate hijacking of Christmas.

JOHN DENVER: 'PLEASE DADDY (DON'T GET DRUNK THIS CHRISTMAS)'

Venture across the pond and you find that, never mind a Christmas single, many artists, particularly in the country music field, release Christmas albums, and on occasion more than one! Unfortunately, these seem to somehow slip past the normal record company quality control procedures. Thus, you can end up with the likes of John Denver (total record sales of 33 million) releasing holiday hiccup 'Please Daddy (Don't Get Drunk This Christmas)' in 1973. A tune with absolutely no redeeming features, I should think even his trusty Guild dreadnought was blushing...

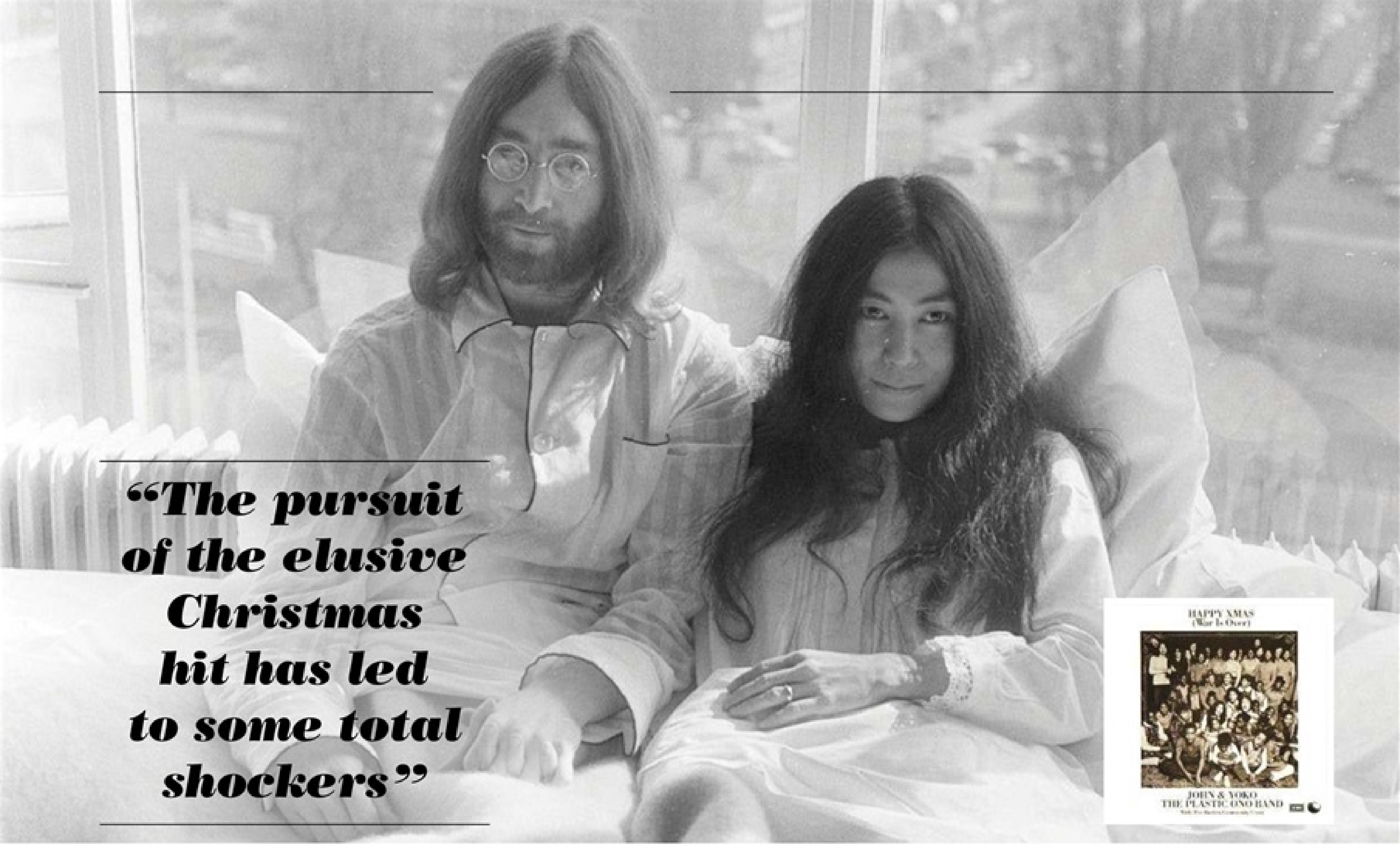


THE BAND: 'CHRISTMAS MUST BE TONIGHT'

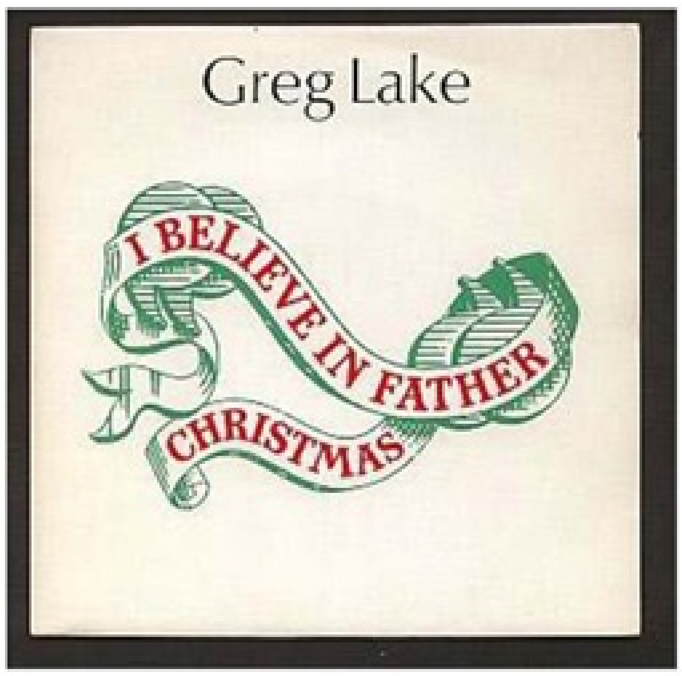
Interestingly, it seems that even possibly the coolest band of all time, The Band, was not above such things. Known to many, somewhat condescendingly, as Dylan's backing band and famously captured by Martin Scorsese in his classic film, *The Last Waltz*, the Canadian-American combo put out 'Christmas Must Be Tonight' on their album *Islands* in 1977. Penned by Robbie Robertson, it's not half bad, very true to their acoustic sound. Lyrically, the idea of telling the Christmas story from the point of view of one of the shepherds is kind of interesting, at the least...

GLEN CAMPBELL: 'CHRISTMAS IS FOR CHILDREN'

One of the greats, sadly lost to us this year, Glen Campbell had numerous Christmas songs, but recently I came across one from his early career, a beautiful song penned by Sammy Cahn and James Van Heusen called 'Christmas Is For Children'. Recorded in 1968, his Ovation Balladeer (this being the first year of his relationship with the company) starts off fighting for earspace with an over-persistent xylophone before being joined by some sumptuous strings. Why is it we have to wait for someone to die before giving them the acknowledgement their talents deserve? On this song his effortless, guy next door vocals are the perfect fit.



“The pursuit of the elusive Christmas hit has led to some total shockers”



THE POGUES FEAT. KIRSTY MACCOLL: 'FAIRYTALE OF NEW YORK'

Back to the 80s and the London Pub scene, where I myself earnt my stripes, there was one notable group of itinerant Irishmen conquering all with their own Celtic punk take on the world; as seen through the eyes of their liberally refreshed frontman, Shane MacGowan. More famous, in the press at least, for his drinking escapades and rotten teeth, this belied a truly worthy writing talent steeped in Irish story-telling. Never was this better seen, of course, than in their 1987 'Fairytale of New York', written by MacGowan and his bandmate Jem Finer. A duet with the wonderful Kirsty MacColl, sadly taken from us in 2000, the song is a perennial gem, often topping the polls, its bawdy language providing the soundtrack to many an office party.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS…

There are, of course, many songs of note here. Mike Oldfield's 1975 offering 'In Dulci Jubilo' is a spirited folk romp that gets wheeled out each year. Another that captures the attention still after many years is 'A Spaceman Came Travelling' by Chris de Burgh. The combination of the Fender Rhodes combined with the sparing acoustic guitar lead line set up the ethereal tone of the piece perfectly. Chris de Burgh, prior to his 'Lady in Red' success, was one seriously talented guy. I saw him support Supertramp a thousand years ago and was taken by the range of his writing.

JOHN AND YOKO'S 'HAPPY XMAS (WAR IS OVER)'

But if you're talking about acoustic Christmas songs, you can't pass without mentioning this one. Set to the tune of the traditional English ballad 'Skewball", the lyrics alluded to John and Yoko's peace protests. Recorded in 1971 with Lennon's friend Phil Spector at the helm and with The Plastic Ono Band ably supported by the Harlem Community Choir, this song had me from the first line. Lennon's opening stanza and the acoustic guitars played balalaika style will remain forever young. That such a musical genius and peace advocate should then be shot nine years later gives this tune a chilling reverence.

…Anyhow, that's about it from me. It's almost time to pull a cracker, wear a daft hat, and burn a turkey. But if you're getting sick of Slade and Wizzard this Christmas, hopefully a few songs mentioned here will give you a lift, a laugh, or the joyous festive vibes we all need during the season to be jolly. Have a happy and peaceful Christmas everyone. ■

A-HA UNPLUGGED

The 80s Norwegian pop favourites return with an acoustic album. Joel McIver meets the men who made your big sister swoon

As live albums go, you'd definitely like to have been at the recording of A-ha's *Summer Solstice*, recorded under the *MTV Unplugged* banner in June. The location was the Øygardshallen venue on Giske, an island off the coast of Norway; the audience were 250 or so invitees; the band was a trio responsible for 100 million album sales since the mid-Eighties. The songs were partly rearranged and stripped back for acoustic instruments, and the guests included Alison Moyet and Echo & The Bunnymen's Ian McCulloch, perhaps a reflection of the fact that it was in merrie England where A-ha first made it big.

Then as now comprising singer Morten Harket and multi-instrumentalists Magne Furuholmen and Pål Waaktaar-Savoy (it's pronounced Paul), A-ha were a lot like Duran Duran, their nearest contemporaries in many ways. First, they were mighty purdy chaps who were plastered all over teeny pop magazines, despite the fact that they were all ferociously accomplished musicians and songwriters. Second, the defining moment for A-ha – the equivalent of Duran's 'Rio' – was the 1985 single 'Take On Me', an ungrammatically-titled song that was most famous for its video.

The great thing about *Summer Solstice*, acoustic as it is, is that the emotional, dynamic arrangements and resonant lyrics of A-ha's songs are emphasised. The group's usual sound is a blend of electronic pop and straightahead balladry, so if you're a fan, you're in for a treat. And as Harket and Furuholmen told *Acoustic* when we met them in London back in September, the decision to strip the songs back to their core components was long overdue.

"When you keep repeating things, you die a slow death," muses Harket. "That's always a danger when you're in a successful band and doing songs people want to hear. The audience want to hear you do exactly that, which is a challenge; redoing it for the sake of somebody else doesn't open your heart or spirit."

Furuholmen adds: "This album was discussed for a long time, on a conceptual level – like, 'Should we do something acoustic, or shouldn't we?' We've done some acoustic songs live, and we've played with orchestras as well, but a full acoustic album just didn't happen. We disbanded a couple of times [1994-1998 and 2010-2015] in the period when we were discussing it, but this felt like the right time to do it. It's something that I've been wanting to do for a long time."

Taking on new challenges: A-ha record their new album live and acoustic for MTV

The *MTV Unplugged* badge, familiar to most of us through huge-selling records with Nirvana, Eric Clapton and so on, fits the vibe of the Giske show pretty well, we reckon. Furuholmen agrees: "MTV got on board quite late. They heard we were going to do something like this, and they knew it was the perfect thing [for a collaboration]. It felt a bit like going full circle with MTV, being what they were when we started out and how that all happened."

The very specific recording setup ultimately drew the musicians together, the two Nordic geezers tell us. We can't help feeling for the producer Lars Horntveth, though, a member of the experimental band Jaga Jazzist. As Furuholmen explains, "We planned it so we would spend the least amount of time possible together, to try and make it painless. The plan was to have an arranger come in and prepare it, and then we would come in and add our bits. But what happened was, we came in and we immediately felt totally alienated with a few of the things."

Horntveth had apparently rearranged the tunes in a way that wasn't quite to A-ha's collective liking. As Harket puts it, "We were up against a common adversary in the producer. He was given the task to attack, basically flog, every song to its core, [back] to what it was when it was written, with the freedom to do whatever he wanted with his perspective, knowing that we would probably not like it at all. Of course we hated what he did, but that was the point – we needed something to respond to, and we needed a rough ride with it."

Furuholmen explains: "The producer came from a progressive jazz background, so some of the ideas were like 'Whoa! That doesn't feel like us at all' and we circled the wagons. He'd done a couple of arrangements for us before, so we knew of him – he's a figure on the Norwegian prog scene. Because his ideas came from a different place, we instinctively started thinking like people with more in common than differences. We started acting as a band instinctively, and we hadn't done that for a long

"I have to believe our greatest music's ahead of us in order to do it. We're here to make art"

time. All of a sudden we were in the same room with really good musicians and a very limited amount of time and instruments.

"It reminded us of the really early days, how we used to make music with people. It put us in a really good place as a band: we instinctively protected what was core for A-ha. That was a good, really unexpectedly fruitful time."

They pulled out all the stops with the featured acoustic instruments, adding piano, harpsichord, celesta and flute. "I bought a tiny little 50s piano and an old harpsichord: we scoured the market to find these old instruments," he tells us. "I played flute for the first time in 20 years, and the three of us sang a lot more together, which was part of the exercise. Taking the old hits apart was always a given, and with a song like 'Take On Me', I wanted to do something that was radically different from the record.

"It took a few tries to get right, but the object was that when you strip the songs down to how they were actually written on acoustic guitars and pianos, you see that they all belong to the same catalogue. They've just been produced very differently. So where 'Take On Me' is very uptempo and upbeat, it still has that minor key melancholy. It was nice to show that it's not a freak song in our catalogue: it's in there with 'Scoundrel Days' and our other darker songs. In fact, in this version, it's a sad ballad."

Harket's unearthly vocals have always played a huge part in A-ha's success: in fact, he holds a record for the 22-second note in one of their songs, 'Summer Moved On'. You get the sense that for him, the thrill of being an athletic singer – a vocal-cord Olympian, if you will – is long gone. Hence the appeal of a new approach to the old hits. "We've wanted to change things and bring new perspectives to the songs many times in the past, but when we go on tour we can't find time to do it," he ponders. "So this time around we really needed to start from fresh and rediscover the songs."

A rearrangement that really works comes in 'Lifelines', originally released in 2002. The middle eight, an uplifting section that is the song's core, is one of the most emotive parts of any A-ha set. Recognising this, the new acoustic version repeats this section right at the top of the song.

"It was only because I liked that part that we did it!" laughs Furuholmen. "The others were against it, but I fought for it on the last tour – but then it slipped back to the old arrangement. For this album, I said 'Look, I really think this part should come twice, it's where you really feel the hair on your neck stand up.'"

Summer Solstice may just be another album for this immensely successful band, but it may also mark the point at which A-ha are taken seriously as songwriters, thanks to the lack of production flourishes in the acoustic format.

"It comes at a time when we are no longer pigeonholed as that 80s band," observes Furuholmen. "We've gone through multiple metamorphoses over our career. There's been a whole new generation of musicians [*Coldplay and Keane, among others – Ed*] that have given the band a lot of kudos over time, so right now it didn't feel like there was any pressure to prove anything. We just wanted to make something meaningful and touching."

We ask the classic evil music-journalist question: Is their best music behind them?

Furuholmen pauses. "Our biggest success is clearly behind us, commercially speaking, but I have to believe that our greatest music is ahead of us in order to do it. We're here to make art. That's what drives you. When you perform old hits, it's like performing the audience's music for them. Those songs are no longer yours. Once you're performing, you kind of lose yourself in the music anyway – you're on autopilot, churning it out. That's why it's healthy to do something like this, where the acoustic format sets limits for what you can do. You relate to the songs again, as if they're yours.

"We've been very lucky. You have to put yourself where luck can find you. If we hadn't gone to England [in 1984], we wouldn't have been here today. Somewhere else, but not here. There's enough good artists who never get to where they should be. You should be humble about the privileges you get given." ■

***MTV Unplugged – Summer Solstice* is out now on Universal. Info: www.a-ha.com**

EDITOR'S CHOICE
GUITAR OF THE YEAR 2017

GUITAR OF THE YEAR 2017

Welcome to Guitar of the Year; the definitive list of the best acoustics we reviewed throughout 2017. We have painstakingly looked back over every guitar that has been featured in the mag over the past 12 months to bring you our standouts.

What a year it's been too! We have seen some mind-blowing guitars come to *Acoustic* Towers for a road test by our expert reviewers. As you may know, we don't put anything in the magazine that we don't recommend. If it'll get torn to pieces by our reviewers – we don't even bother. Pages are too precious to tell you how bad a guitar is. As such, it's been really difficult choosing what to include.

Out of the 80-odd guitars we reviewed throughout 2017, only 20 have made it into this highly prestigious list. This year, we will crown two winners, of sorts. Like usual, we will choose our overall Guitar of the Year, but we will also crown Best Budget Guitar (you can read the full reviews for both from page 38). There are a couple of Editor's Choices as well, which narrowly missed-out on being crowned – only just – but are definite standouts among the stars.

Guitars at every price-point – from £290 to £3847 – and every style have managed to land our jaws firmly on the floor this year and this is reflected in the feature. No matter what guitar you're after, or how much you have to spend, you'll find something here.

Be sure to let us know what you think of this year's choices too. Here's to another year of amazing gear!

HEAR THE DETAILS

AGED TO
VINTAGE TOP

SONICALLY
ENHANCING
UV FINISH

DOUBLELOCK
NECK JOINT

Cort
GOLD

In crafting the Cort Gold we considered every detail with a focus on great tone. It starts with a solid Sitka Spruce top that we aged to vintage using special technology. We hand-carved the bracing on that aged top to further let the tone shine. Other details like an ultra-thin UV finish, reinforced neck joint, and much more make up the details that you can hear.

Learn more at www.CortGuitars.com/gold.

Cort®
since 1960

£330

FENDER
CLASSIC CD-140SCE

Fender, the company, needs no introduction. And while its acoustics are less talked-of, Fender has been honing its craft since 1946, learning from its players, improving models, resourcing high quality affordable woods and machinery. All that boils down to a staggering offer for the CD-140SCE. With a price tag of £330, this guitar is an absolute steal. There's no trickery here though, just honest, solid acoustic guitar craftsmanship.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"This guitar has been pitched by Fender at any aspiring player – but I would say even the more experienced players can get some good sounds out of it...
If you know someone who wants to learn, or wants to amp up the volume, it's a no-brainer – buy it!"

Body size: Jumbo
Top: Spruce
Back and Sides: Rosewood
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 43mm **Scale Length:** 643mm
Onboard Electrics: Fishman® Presys
Tuners: Chrome die-cast
Made in: Indonesia
Gig Bag/Case included: No
www.fender.com

£549

CORT
AS-OC4

Cort is possibly the biggest guitar builder that most guitarists have never heard of. And while the majority of their enormous South Korean factory is dedicated to building instruments for other manufacturers, Cort do have their own range which appears to offer incredible value. Can they really be as good as the specs suggest, though? This all solid guitar – with a piezo pickup and a hard case for £549 – proves they can.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"The Cort doesn't have brand recognition, but for the player who is looking for truly excellent tone and playability on a budget, it's hard to beat. I'm not sure I've ever seen a guitar at this price point that's better, never mind one that comes with a pickup system and a hard case."

Body size: OM
Top: Solid mahogany
Back and Sides: Solid mahogany
Neck: Mahogany
Bridge: Rosewood
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 45mm **Scale Length:** 643mm
Onboard Electrics: Fishman Sonitone
Tuners: Closed back
Made in: South Korea
Gig Bag/Case included: Yes
www.cortguitars.com

£2229

C.F. MARTIN & CO.
0-18

C.F. Martin & Co are one of the best known and loved acoustic guitar companies in the world – and for good reason. Time and time again, their guitars hit the prestigious five-stars all round when we put them to the test.
It is little wonder that there are a couple of Martin's in this year's list, then.
The 0-18 certainly lives up to the manufacturer's first-rate reputation.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"The 0-18 has an unexpectedly balanced tone for its size with a pleasant emphasis on the upper mid frequencies. The projection is excellent, with a good volume when strummed and great definition for fingerpicking... If I had to have just one acoustic guitar this would be a strong contender."

Body Size: Parlour
Top: Sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Mahogany
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: Select hardwood
Fingerboard: Ebony with abalone dot inlays
Nut Width: 45mm **Scale Length:** 632.46mm
Onboard Electronics: Optional
Tuners: Nickel open gear
Made In: USA
Gig Bag/Case included: Ply hardshell
www.westsidedistribution.com

£469

FAITH
NOMAD MINI-NEPTUNE

Faith has built an enviable reputation based on incredible value for money thanks to all-solid construction and designs by renowned luthier Patrick James Eggle. And, really, it's impossible not to be impressed by the Nomad Series, especially the Mini-Neptune. At 590mm in scale length, this guitar is noticeably smaller but not so much as to drastically alter the playing experience, striking a good balance that allows Faith to retain proper string tension.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"The all-mahogany construction of the Neptune works wonders with this relatively small-bodied instrument. The mids bring an unexpected but pleasant depth and presence to the tone that is well balanced across the strings and belies the size of the body... What you have here is one exceptional travel guitar."

Body Size: Travel baby jumbo
Top: Solid mahogany
Back and Sides: Solid mahogany
Bridge: Macassan figured ebony **Neck:** Mahogany
Fingerboard: Indonesian rosewood
Nut Width: 43mm **Scale Length:** 590mm
Onboard Electrics: Faith CnR-3
Tuners: Precision chrome
Made In: Indonesia
Gig Bag/Case Included: Gig bag
www.bandm.co.uk

£869

IBANEZ
AVD16LTD

The Ibanez AVD16LTD is one of the Artwood Vintage Thermo Aged series. This spruce top has been Thermo Aged, otherwise known as torrefaction. This relatively new process involves heating the top in the absence of oxygen to remove water and volatiles. The purpose of this is to give the guitar a similar molecular composition – and therefore tonal response – to vintage guitars' tops after decades of aging. And, blimey, the results speak for themselves.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Ibanez, it seems, are catering for an increasing demand among guitarists for instruments that have a vintage look and classic sound, right off the bat... What makes this the more impressive is the price... The Ibanez AVD16LTD is like a top-of-the-range Martin guitar catered for the upper to mid-range budget."

Body Size: Dreadnought
Top: Thermo Aged TM solid sitka spruce
Back and sides: Solid Indian rosewood
Bridge: Ebony **Neck:** Mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 43mm **Scale Length:** 651mm
Onboard Electrics: No
Tuners: Gotoh® Gold SG 301
Made in: China
Gig Bag/Case included: Hardshell case
www.ibanez.com

£1099

ANDREW WHITE GUITARS
CYBELE 1010

White, like more and more luthiers, realises the value in taking the designs from his signature range, that he has spent years of his life refining, and having them factory-made overseas – in this case Korea – to give more people the chance of playing his instrument. And considering Cybele costs a sixth of the cost of a White handmade model, we're totally onboard with that decision.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"This is a beautiful sounding instrument, with a rich and complex tone that seems to float in and out of your ears as it washes over you. It plays and feels superb under the fingers – the neck really is fantastic – and it responds equally dynamically to fingerstyle as it does to a pick."

Body Size: 000/Parlour hybrid
Top: Sitka spruce
Back and sides: Rosewood
Bridge: Andrew White custom pau ferra
Neck: Spanish cedar
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 42.9mm **Scale Length:** 647.7mm
Onboard Electronics: Artec Edge Z
Made In: Korea
Gig bag: Andrew White moulded case
www.thenorthamericanguitar.com

£749

VINTAGE PAUL BRETT STATESBORO' 12-STRING

Designed by 12-string guitarist, vintage guitar expert, and *Acoustic* columnist Paul Brett as a fitting tribute to the pioneering blues era of the 1930s, in particular the legendary Blind Willie McTell, this 12-string oozes nostalgia. Using the designs of the legendary Stella guitars crafted by Oscar Schmidt in the early 20th century, Paul and Vintage have created a homage to the iconic model that Willie himself played.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Getting a good sound out of the Statesboro' is simple, especially if you are looking for a bright sound. Amplifying the guitar makes it sound even better. There are no knobs or switches to mess around with; just plug in at the bottom where a strap would be attached and away you go."

Body size: Parlour
Top: Solid spruce
Back and sides: Maple and mahogany
Bridge: Rosewood **Neck:** Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 50mm **Scale Length:** 675mm
Onboard electrics: Fishman REP-102 Rare Earth Humbucker soundhole pick-up
Tuners: Chrome with cream buttons
Made In: UK
Gig Bag/Case Included: Kinsman Hardshell Case
vintageguitarsus.com

£1280

ADMIRA A25

Founded in Spain in 1944, Admira is undoubtedly one of the most popular Spanish classical guitar manufacturers in the world today. With only a few automated processes, most parts are still built and finished by hand. Indeed, the A25 comes extremely close to proving that the larger companies can produce impressive instruments with a craft akin to the smaller workshop.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Where this guitar really stands out is in the production and quality of the sound. The tones are impressive. The lower and mid range has abundant gravitas. The top end has a softer, melting tone... The projection is clean with an opaque tinge, which aids the full, mellow sound."

Body Size: 4/4
Top: Selected solid cedar
Back and Sides: Selected solid Indian rosewood
Neck: Mahogany with ebony reinforcement
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 52mm
Scale Length: 645mm
Onboard electronics: None
Tuners: Lyre design gold
Made In: Spain
Gig Bag/Case Included: No
www.admiraguitars.co.uk

£1849

LARRIVÉE OM-03 SILVERWOOD

We've featured Larrivée in *Acoustic* for years and years now. And while they are undoubtedly beautiful guitars, we'd never have accused them of opting for style over substance. So this limited edition guitar, which features an unusual and visually striking exotic tonewood for the back and sides, is quite the event. Offering first-rate looks, build quality, sound, and playability – it's difficult to say a bad word about this beauty.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Larrivée has consistently produced some of the most playable and rewarding acoustics in this price range and this new OM-3 might well top the lot. It's exceptional in just about every way and I don't hesitate to recommend it to anyone that's in the market for an acoustic in this price range."

Body size: Orchestra
Top: Solid sitka spruce
Back and sides: Solid silver oak
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 44.5mm **Scale Length:** 647.7mm
Onboard Electronics: LR Baggs Anthem
Tuners: Larrivée
Made in: Canada
Gig Bag/Case included: Larrivée hardshell case
www.soundtech.co.uk

£290

GRETSCH G9511 STYLE 1 SINGLE-O PARLOUR

The Gretsch pedigree goes all the way back to 1883, when the company made drums, tambourines and banjos. Gretsch started making guitars in the 1930s and has since maintained its reputation for quality. The snappily titled G9511 Style 1 Single-0 Parlour won us over the moment it came out of the box. Styled after the stunning parlour guitars of the 1930s, it's a truly impressive instrument, especially at the price.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Overall, the Gretsch G9511 is a great guitar at a bargain price. It would be easy to act snobbish about the laminate back and sides and the Asian origin, but don't be. Instead, try this guitar for yourself and you'll find it better than many of the more expensive guitars, even some of those with all-solid woods."

Body Size: Parlour
Top: Solid spruce
Back and Sides: Laminate mahogany
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 44mm **Scale Length:** 632mm
Onboard Electrics: No
Tuners: Open gear
Made In: Not specified
Gig Bag/Case included: No
www.gretschguitars.com

£999

AUDEN JULIA

When we unwrapped the Auden Julian it felt right. In fact, so bowled over was our reviewer that he declared love at first sight!

The Julia certainly is not a style over substance guitar, however. A firm strum of your favourite chord produces a great balance of lows, mids and highs from the soundhole. The fit of this guitar is just right.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"When you consider the asking price for a guitar such as this, I'd be happy to pay more than £1500. Sure, Auden may have cut a few corners, but it isn't visible in the aesthetics, and my enjoyment while playing… This flawless guitar appears to boast a standard RRP of just £999."

Body Size: Concert
Top: AAA cedar
Back and Sides: African mahogany
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: African mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 43mm **Scale Length:** 625mm
Onboard Electrics: Schertler Lydia preamp
Tuners: Schertler
Made In: Northamptonshire, UK
Gig Bag/Case included: Brown leather hardcase
www.audenguitars.com

£1099

FURCH D-20CM9

Behold, in all its weird, unbalanced-headstock glory, this bold Luke Skywalker of a guitar – familiar enough body complemented by an artificially enhanced limb (or neck, in this case). The Furch D-20CM9 is not an entirely new concept, however. The great Mississippi blues shouter, Big Joe Williams, carved out an entire career playing nine-string guitars he'd cobbled together from standard six-string model. Perhaps nine's due a revival?

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Why bother with the nine strings? If it isn't looks, it has to be sound – and it's here the D-20CM9 starts to make sense. With a voice as loud as you'd expect from a quality 12-string, while offering far cleaner definition from those 'free-standing' bass strings. As a vehicle for singer-songwriters, it's ideal."

Body Size: Dreadnought
Top: Western red cedar
Back and Sides: African mahogany
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: African mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 48mm **Scale Length:** 650mm
Onboard Electronics: None
Tuners: Furch Machine Chrome Gear
Gig Bag/Case Included: Fitted gig bag
Made In: Czech Republic
www.furch.cz/en

£899

TANGLEWOOD
SUNDANCE PRO X70 TE

Tanglewood have a legion of aficionados and professionals who swear by their acoustic guitars – from Fleetwood Mac's founder Peter Green, to Grammy award-winning R&B artist Corinne Bailey Rae. Known for their exceptional value, these guitars usually play host to a mixture of traditional and innovative design features. The Tanglewood Sundance Professional X70 TE is apparently the 'culmination of decades of guitar building expertise and research'.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Any guitar priced at £899 sounds a little on the expensive side for the average acoustic guitarist, but with all the clever and innovative features this guitar offers, this is an amazing price. That said, it doesn't come with a gig bag. The X70 TE has many hallmarks of an instrument that will age well."

Body size: Orchestra
Top: Torrefied solid spruce
Bridge: Solid rock maple
Back and sides: Solid mahogany
Neck: African mahogany **Fingerboard:** Sonokelin
Nut Width: 43mm **Scale Length:** 650mm
Onboard Electrics: Fishman Presys+
Tuners: Chrome Grover
Made in: China
Gig Bag/Case included: No
www.tanglewoodguitars.co.uk

£1349

MANUEL RODRIGUEZ
MODEL FF

Manuel Rodriguez classical guitars are well known in the business. The company operates in over 120 countries and has been making guitars since 1905. In 2000, Manuel Rodriguez expanded its range to include flamenco guitars, cajóns and ukuleles. This delightful spruce-topped FF is one of the company's top-end flamenco models; offering instant appeal for true flamenco aficionados.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"This instrument is probably more for true advocates of flamenco music rather than those wishing to dip their toes in Andalusian waters. It's the next step up from the mid-range instruments and for guitarists wanting to get their teeth into the wide-ranging rhythms of the cante jondo, the cante chico, the cante intermedio or even the intricacies of the traditional fandango."

Top: Solid German spruce
Back and Sides: Solid cypress
Bridge: Indian rosewood
Neck: Honduras cedar reinforced with ebony
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 52mm **Scale Length:** 650mm
Onboard Electrics: None
Tuners: Gold plated
Made In: Spain
Gig Bag/Case Included: No
www.westsidedistribution.com

£1995

C.F. MARTIN & CO.
DR CENTENNIAL

The dreadnought marked its 100th anniversary in 2016. Fitting, then, that the design's originator is the one to celebrate a century of defining acoustic music. But where you might expect such a momentous occasion to be celebrated by the most exotic and extravagant collection of tonewoods, decorations and technological twists, we got something quite the opposite. The Martin DR Centennial might well be the purest acoustic guitar we've ever played – and it's incredible.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"Martin is capable of making a piece of wood sing like a chorus of angels; and never has a guitar more perfectly demonstrated this talent and ingenuity...
It just fits, and the end result is without a doubt the finest dreadnought I've ever played."

Body Size: Dreadnought
Top: Adirondack spruce
Back and Sides: East Indian rosewood
Bridge: East Indian rosewood
Neck: Select hardwood **Fingerboard:** East Indian rosewood
Nut Width: 44.5mm **Scale Length:** 645mm
Onboard Electrics: None
Tuners: Nickel open gear
Made in: USA
Gig Bag/Case Included: Ply Hardshell
www.westsidedistribution.com

£765

ALVAREZ DELTA 00EDLX/SHB

Alvarez is a St Louis based guitar brand, who are also well known for their collaboration with K Yairi guitars in Japan, producing the outstanding Alvarez-Yairi instruments. This instrument comes from their 'Jazz and Blues' collection, a series of small bodied acoustics and hollow body electric guitars launched in 2016. It may hail from Missouri rather than the Mississippi Delta, but this parlour guitar has a lot to offer.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"This guitar is excellent value. A street price of just £765 for all solid woods is pretty keen anyway, and once you factor in the bone nut and saddle, nice fit and finish and great looks, it's a killer deal… If you're looking for an all solid parlour, don't buy until you try this."

Body size: Parlour
Top: Solid spruce
Back and Sides: Solid mahogany
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 44.45mm
Scale Length: 630mm
Onboard Electrics: LR Baggs VTC
Tuners: Premium Open Gear Chrome
Made In: USA
Gig Bag/Case included: No
www.alvarezguitars.com

£1799

LARRIVÉE EUROPEAN FLAMED ASH LIMITED EDITION D-03

Jean-Claude Larrivée learned his trade from German ex-POW Edgar Mönch, who'd studied with master classical-guitar builders in Europe between the wars. Hence, there's an enviable sense of history attached to a Larrivée, as well as the expectation of top quality workmanship. What often comes as a surprise is the affordability factor; Larrivée has always strived to provide a classy product at a reasonable price, as is demonstrated perfectly with this limited edition.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"This is an immaculately-built instrument and while we could dwell at length on technical nuance and Larrivée-specific build techniques, the bottom line is, it simply looks and sounds superb… A couple of days with the D-03 brought on a firm conviction that this really is a wonderful guitar, especially at the price."

Body Size: Dreadnought
Top: Sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Premium European Flamed Ash
Bridge: Ebony **Neck:** Mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 42.9mm **Scale Length:** 648mm
Onboard Electronics: None
Tuners: Larrivée
Made In: USA
Gig Bag/Case Included: Larrivée Deluxe Hardshell
www.larrivee.com

£3847

TAYLOR 612CE 12-FRET

Taylor introduced the revoiced 600 series a few years ago with the aim of making guitarists rediscover a wood that has legendary status in the violin making world: maple. For some, rightly or wrongly, maple has a reputation of being toppy and brittle; a sound that can cut through in the mix, but lacks the warmth and depth of character of some other tonewoods. It's been a success too, according to Taylor.

REVIEW EXCERPT

"The 612ce is an unbelievably comfy guitar to play. It just fits into your body and the fretting hand feels remarkably relaxed thanks to that slightly shorter scale. Staying in first position provides a surprisingly loud, complex tone. The projection is quite staggering… One of the best guitars I've laid hands on."

Body Size: Grand Concert
Top: Sitka spruce (torrefied)
Back and Sides: Maple
Bridge: Ebony **Neck:** Maple
Fingerboard: Ebony
Nut Width: 25.4mm
Scale Length: 609.6mm
Onboard Electrics: Expression 2
Tuners: Grained ivoroid
Made In: USA
Gig Bag/Case Included: Hard case
www.taylorguitars.com

WINNER
Best Budget Guitar

ART & LUTHERIE
ROADHOUSE TENNESSEE RED

Ollie McGhie was so impressed by this guitar, he dubbed it best budget guitar of 2017 – and bought one

Let's get straight to it. This Roadhouse Tennessee Red is a superb piece of musical craft. Made by Art & Lutherie, a sub-brand of Godin Guitars (known mostly for their electric guitars) this parlour model cuts straight to the chase – it's clean, it's earthy, it's got attack and its design takes you back in time to the rural deep south where all you might have had were the clothes on your back and this instrument for company.

The original version of this guitar was electro-acoustic, featuring the Fishman Sonitone Preamp system, but through sheer popularity at the 2017 NAMM show, and the desire to have it at the lowest possible price, Art & Luthierie developed this model – void of electrics and with woods sourced predominantly from Canada's own roots. The result is equally tantalising.

For some the smaller parlour guitar may not be an option (owing to large hand sizes, or the nature of your guitar performance) but this guitar is the dream for all acoustic players who want to be on the move – from venue to venue, busking through to cosy lounge jamming. For a start it looks like it's meant for greatness. The wild cherry back and sides are a rich crimson. Interestingly when burnt it gives off a sweet-scented smoke, though we won't be testing that. While this type of wood is hard and durable – used a lot for veneers and furniture, here it has been triple laminated. What this means is that three pieces of the same Wild Cherry wood have been cut thin enough to be bent into shape without the need for heating and steaming. The results are that you end up with a stiffer box, which has been concocted in a quicker production time, which in turn saves on cost. There is also less wastage making it a more eco-friendly specimen too. Those Canadians are always so damn helpful.

Setting off the red sides, the circumference of the top is bound with a thick off-white band of plastic binding, which gives the guitar that authentic vintage vibe. The solid spruce top shows off some rubescent textures, uncommonly seen in such woods. On further investigation, it transpires it has been stained to match the Wild Cherry back and sides. The top is also described as 'select pressure tested' so you can be assured that it is of good strength and rigidity while allowing maximum capacity for harmonic vibration. Protecting the top is a white purloid pickguard, shaped to match the contours of the lower bout, which contrasts perfectly with the red spruce top.

The neck is made from silver leaf maple, a variety indigenous to Canada. Originally the neck and headstock were one piece but the headstock was removed, shaped and reattached with the grain reversed – all with the intention of making a stable neck. When playing the neck you certainly feel like it has the strength to support the angst of even the most cantankerous players. The headstock sports the Art & Lutherie logo and some dapper brass tuners, which have white pegs – a nice touch, keeping to the limited but stylish colour palette of red and white. Adjoined to the neck is a rosewood fingerboard decorated with standard position markers.

Playing this Roadhouse Tennessee Red is an absolute joy. The middle and upper ranges of the guitar are very strong. The bass less so, but this could be down to a string-related matter rather than any tonal resonance issues. When I try some alternative tuning dropping the bottom E to a D opens up the bass no end. Blues and country come to the fore. Suddenly I see myself as a Gerry Jolly, a Stu Phillips or even a Lindsay Ell (all Canadian Country music stars – not necessarily parlour guitar players).

There's clarity too, combined with an understated subtle warmth. Owing to a lot of choral singing, I have to practise my parts sightreading bass clef up onto the treble. I inevitably do this on guitars I review. On this

GUITAR OF THE YEAR 2017
WINNER
Best Budget Guitar
GUITAR OF THE YEAR 2017

parlour it's an absolute pleasure. All the notes are clean. Melodies come out with a sincere, sweet definition, when played with fingerstyle over the high-end of the fingerboard. The size of the guitar means it'll never compete with the voice too. The harsher blues and country sounds are there but you have to play them to get them – mostly between the soundhole and the rosewood bridge, and aided by Graphtech Tusq™ nut and saddle (a material designed to mimic bone). Playing by the bridge gives you plenty of attack with ample projection (for a parlour guitar). A plectrum helps too.

The strings are set at an optimum distance from the fingerboard so the right hand doesn't feel cramped and has plenty of space for fingerstyle and strumming techniques. This also helps the left hand glide up and down the Rosewood fretboard with such ease that it's hard to imagine ever going back to even an '0' model guitar. Like the ukulele this Roadhouse Tennessee Red doesn't require that much effort to be playing all over the guitar. The left hand, obviously, has a very easy time spanning the frets on this parlour compared to the larger six-stringed cousins. Ever alert to the musician's needs this guitar comes with a double action truss rod so you can alter this distance between the guitar and the strings to your acquired taste (or, in the more practical vein, to compensate for any under or over bowing).

The guitar is like a pocket-sized bag of country rock n roll - compact and ready to go at a moment's notice. This is to all intents and purposes exactly what Art & Lutherie had in mind – a model and series harking back to the sound of those old blues boxes but within an affordable budget of £369. "Not many Southern Blues players could afford a D28 after all,," adds the UK 440 distribution company. There's so much versatility it's hard to stop playing it. The end-pin gives you opportunity to play the parlour on the move too.

I must confess I've been sold on this guitar and it may well be my next addition. Why not add it to your collection? If the red isn't to your taste there's a bourbon burst or faded black to choose from as well. Plus it comes with a lightwight soft gig bag, which has armstraps.

"The kind of guitar I want to play is mean, mean licks," said John Lee Hooker. This guitar can help you do that. ■

"I must confess I've been sold on this guitar and it may well be my next addition"

ART & LUTHERIE ROADHOUSE TENNESSEE RED

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Art & Lutherie
Model: Roadhouse Tennessee Red
RRP: £369
Made in: Canada
Body size: Parlour
Top: Spruce
Back and sides: Wild Cherry
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: Silver leaf maple
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Nut Width: 43.69mm
Scale Length: 630.94mm
Onboard Electrics: None (Fishman Sonitone option available)
Tuners: Open-gear 18:1 antique brass tuners
Gig Bag/Case included: Gig bag
Website: www.440distribution.com

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A sweet blues and country box designed for the nomadic musician
Cons: If you have massive hands your thumbs might get in the way
Overall: It's got attack, projection, volume, character and style. And it's only a parlour

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality:
Sound Quality:
Overall:

CONTACT DETAILS

www.artandlutherieguitars.com

ORANGE™

KONGPRESSOR

THE NEW KING
OF COMPRESSION

CLEAN - CLASS A - CLASSIC

orangeamps.com

WINNER
Guitar Of The Year

YAMAHA A5R ARE

Alun Lower quite simply could not find a fault with the flagship model from the newly-revamped, performance-focused A series

Yamaha is a company that finds itself in the enviable position of possessing considerable prowess and gravitas in just about every sector they've ever taken an interest in. The guitar side of the company is no exception, with some extraordinary instruments at every single price point pushing the boundaries of craftsmanship, value, design and innovation. It's a typically Japanese approach in that it places great care in the details while never losing sight of the bigger picture. Whether it's an F310 propped up in the corner of a teenager's bedroom or a coveted, hand-crafted LL56 nestled in its hardcase like expensive jewellery, Yamaha's guitars serve their intended purpose with aplomb and have fans from every walk of life and musical niche. For me, I've always had a real affinity with the A series, with its focus towards gigging musicians and home recording enthusiasts. I've reviewed both the A1 and A2 models in the past and found them to be near enough the perfect guitars for the mid- and upper mid-range price brackets, so I was already very excited to check out the newest addition to the family.

BUILD QUALITY

Interestingly, the A5 is actually based very closely on the limited edition A6 that the company introduced in 2015, which took the winning foundation laid down by the A3 and A1 models and upped the production values beyond their already impressive levels, with the flagship version handcrafted in Yamaha's Hamamatsu factory in Japan. In terms of the raw ingredients, what you have here is a familiar cutaway dreadnought (or 'Western Body Cutaway' in Yamaha's official blurb), fashioned from a gorgeous, richly-coloured rosewood back and sides and topped with a vintage natural-tinted Sitka spruce top treated with Yamaha's Acoustic Resonance Enhancement system (or ARE), a process that aims to create a desirable 'played-in' or aged tone in a brand-new instrument. There's a lot of scientific talk about cellulose and hemicellulose that we could go into, but essentially what you need to know is that this treatment affects the wood at a cellular level to theoretically take away the hardness and rigidity over years of playing, which results in a more mature and open tone right from day one. Under the hood, the A5R also sports scalloped bracing to get the most out of the treated top and to give greater volume and projection. Elsewhere on the body there are plenty of lovely touches that give the guitar that little extra bit of class, like the mahogany and cream binding, and the soundhole rosette, featuring some intricate rosewood and mahogany woodwork.

The neck is constructed from African mahogany, and much like the more affordable A series models features a 'hand-rolled' ebony fingerboard. It sounds a little gimmicky but in use the neck is really very easy to manoeuvre around. Coupled with the fact that the fret finishing is easily the best I've played on an acoustic in the last year at least, it makes for an acoustic that still feels like an acoustic, but can almost be played as easily as an electric. I don't want the dreaded 'e' word to cause any alarm though – just play one and see for yourself.

The overall vibe of the A5R is very much a case of 'vintage modern'. Ergonomically and functionally the guitar feels very modern indeed, but details like the tinted finish, cross fret inlays, open-gear tuners and retro tortoiseshell pickguard keep the guitar grounded within its ancestry. It's an approach that many guitars attempt, and success varies wildly, but here it's done well and I can easily see guitarists from all preferences finding something to like. As you'd expect from a high-end Yamaha the overall construction is utterly flawless, and despite my very best efforts I can't find anything to complain about. That isn't completely subjective, anyway.

Of course, a big part of the A5R's appeal is in the electronics package. After all, this is a guitar that's built for gigging and recording, so it would be remiss of Yamaha not to pay its dues on this front. The guitar comes equipped with Yamaha's System71 SRT2 electronics package, a system that offers two distinct microphone modelling modes to simulate a

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studio recording environment. Four minimal (and totally unlabelled) controls offer you control over myriad functions. The top-most control is for volume, primarily, but also has an LED indicator that indicates which microphone model is currently selected, whether the AFR (feedback reduction) function is being applied, or if the battery is low. The two middle controls look after the bass and treble frequencies, with the left (bass) control also doubling up as an activation switch for the AFR system. Finally, the bottom control manages the blend between the simulated microphone and piezo signals, with a press of the switch flipping between two microphone models (condenser and ribbon). In a further effort to curb unwanted feedback, Yamaha also supply a soundhole cover.

SOUND QUALITY

Acoustically the A5R is a true delight. Whether the ARE process makes the guitar sound mature beyond its years is a topic I'm sure would be debated endlessly by purists, but certainly from my point of view the general tone is extremely well balanced, full-voiced and rich across the tonal spectrum. Where some spruce/rosewood guitars can sound very piano-like at a first play, with bright, clear trebles and a clanging, crisp low end, the A5R sounds somewhat less polarizing across the spectrum. All those qualities are there of course, but it just blends that little bit differently and to my ear that is indeed the hallmark of a 'played-in' guitar. The guitar ticks just about every box you could want – the sustain seems to last for days, with the harmonics bounding around beautifully as chords ring out around your ears. It's worth noting that a mahogany version of the A5 is also available, but to my mind the sheer clarity and definition of rosewood is the perfect partner for a guitar that is designed with the stage and studio in mind. But for those that want a little more 'boom' in their bass, the mahogany could be a good option as well.

Plugged in, and using the condenser mic as the starting point, the acoustic tone of the A5 is carried across very well indeed. The blend control is vital to get the best out of the tone, and I found it best to start with a purely mic-based tone before introducing the pickup signal bit-by-bit until I hit a sweet spot. It's crisp, clear and very modern-sounding, with an almost hi-fi like quality to it. Switching to the ribbon model adds a more vintage vibe to proceedings, rounding out the tone a little and softening the harsher edges of that spruce/rosewood combo. Both sounds are infectiously usable, and it will be down to your own playing style to determine which mode best suits your approach.

CONCLUSION

As with the other guitars in Yamaha's A series, I've come away completely charmed by the A5R. The original models are still fantastic in their own right, but for more well-heeled buyers, the A5R takes the formula up a notch to offer a guitar that excels in virtually every scenario – a truly luxurious instrument you'll treasure for many years to come. This is one of the most playable, functional and rewarding acoustics I've played in recent times, and it deserves to be on your 'must-try' list if you're in the market for a serious instrument that covers all the bases for recording and gigging. ■

"The guitar ticks just about every box you could want"

YAMAHA A5R ARE

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Yamaha
Model: A5R ARE
RRP: £1279
Made In: Japan
Body Size: Dreadnought cutaway
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Solid rosewood
Neck: Three-ply African mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Bridge: Ebony/TUSQ
Nut Width: 43mm
Scale Length: 650mm
Electronics: System71 preamp and SRT2 piezo pickup
Controls: Volume, Mic Select, Tone and Blend
Tuners: Gotoh Open Gear Chrome
Gig Bag/Case included: Hard case included

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Superb acoustic and electro tones, and stunning build quality
Cons: None
Overall: The quintessential electro-acoustic

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality: ✪✪✪✪✪
Sound Quality: ✪✪✪✪✪
Overall: ✪✪✪✪✪

CONTACT DETAILS

uk.yamaha.com

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Est. 1995
artandlutherieguitars.com

INSIDE COLLECTION
PAUL BRETT

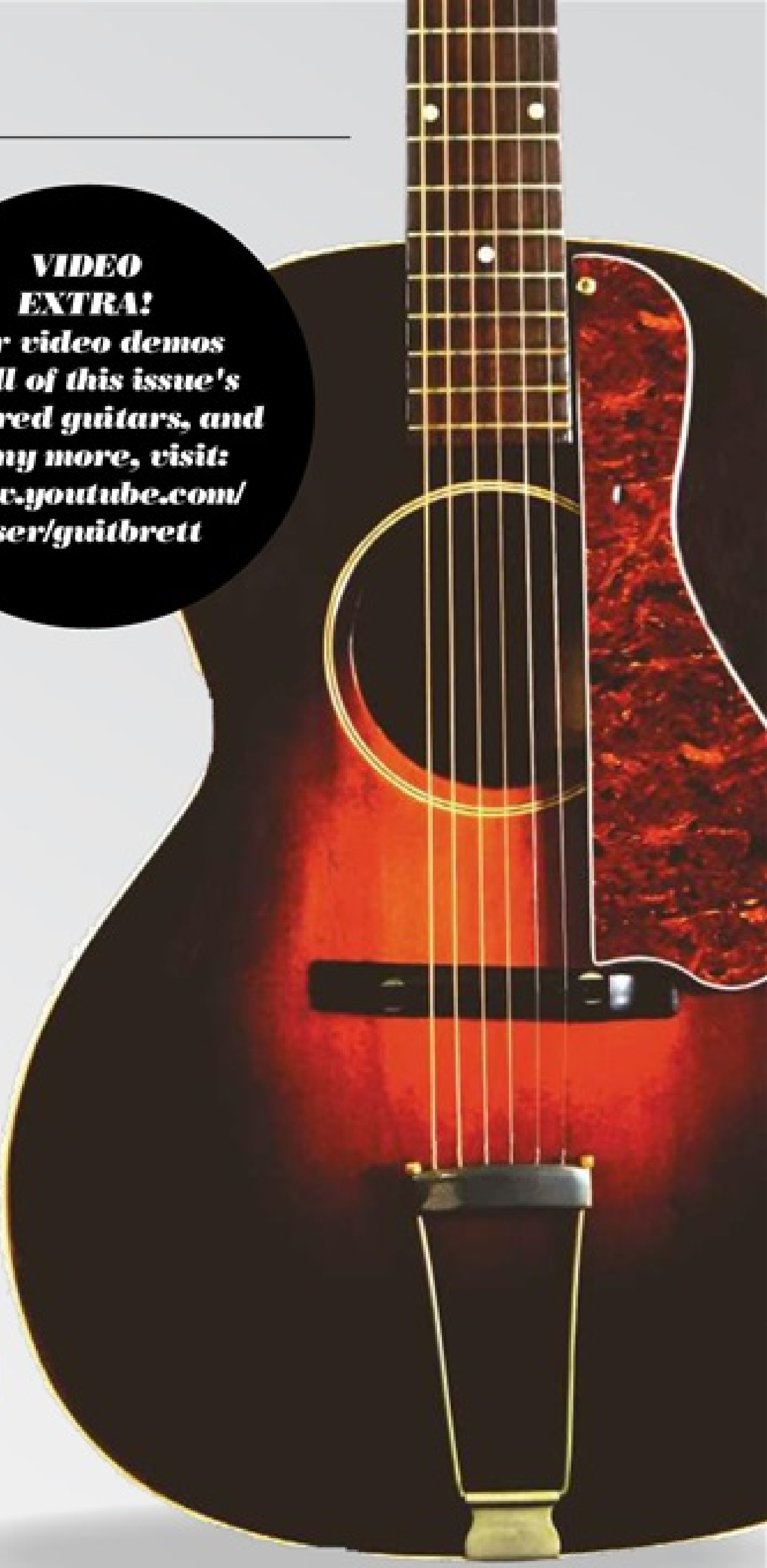
Aeroplane bridges, flower power and more: Paul Brett once again invites us into his formidable guitar-closet for a history lesson

DEL VECCHIO DINAMICO

Chet Atkins used this model (pictured left) on his classic song 'Maria Elena' recording and said it was one of his favourites. It resembles a classic resonator design, fit for slide blues, but it isn't. The Del Vecchio Dinamico produces a sweet, mellow tone unique to its appearance. Its construction is a single cone, wood-bodied (Brazilian rosewood ply) instrument with a resonator front-piece. Scale length is 24 1/2" and it has a zero fret with a two-inch wide nut. It has more of a classical style neck and works best with either silk and steel or nylon strings, a far cry from harsher steel strung resonators. Del Vecchio guitars began in the early 20th century in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and are still in operation today. They're very different in concept to most guitars and well worth checking out if you can actually find one. My one is from the 1960s and has the original factory-fitted single pickup.

STELLA FLOWER

Here's a lovely little parlour guitar (pictured right) by the doyen of blues traditional guitars Oscar Schmidt, from his world famous and very collectable Stella acoustic range. Adorned with rare flowery decals, this could have been a peace and love guitar for Hippies in the 60s (although it was made 30 or so years earlier) and it has a birch body, as did many Stellas. It's in very good condition for its age. It is set up for a combination of slide and fingerstyle playing. These were the true working mens' guitars of the 20s and 30s, selling at an average price of a few dollars. I don't think I could name many early bluesmen who didn't play Stellas and over the years they have become extremely sought after. This one has a really 'earthy' street sound that will thrash out this style of blues till the end of time. They are becoming quite rare to find in any sort of good condition, especially the 12-strings, which are highly sought after.



***VIDEO EXTRA!* For video demos of all of this issue's featured guitars, and many more, visit: www.youtube.com/user/guitbrett**

HOFNER COMMITTEE

US guitars have dominated since the 60s (Fender and Gibsons being the main beneficiaries), but let's not forget the contribution of European-made guitars had on our early rock and skiffle genres. Hofner are indeed responsible for many early rock musicians' rise to fame. Marty Wilde, Hank Marvin and even Buddy Holly, to name a few played the semi acoustic models. Lennon played the Hofner Club, Paul McCartney the iconic Beatle bass, George Harrison the President, Eric Clapton had one of their acoustics, Ritchie Blackmore played a Club 50 and of course *Acoustic*'s Gordon Giltrap played Committees and Clubs. Hofner doesn't always receive credit for its major contribution to rock and pop. I've owned and played a few but the Committee is probably my favourite. Mine was pure acoustic with a carved solid top, laminated birds eye maple back and sides, without pickups. They have a most attractive body binding finish with faux mother of pearl inlays, layers of white and black purfling and a unique leaf motif on the back – the icing on the cake. They don't have a great deal of bass response like many similar designs, but they cut through nicely with other instruments.

SUPERTONE AEROPLANE BRIDGE

One of my favourite guitars (albeit on the quirky side) is a 1928 Supertone parlour six-string with an aeroplane shaped bridge, made to commemorate the Charles Lindberg's solo, cross-Atlantic flight in 1927. The Supertone brand of guitars were built for Sears and sold via their outlets in the US. The back and sides are made of koa and it has a mahogany neck with ebony fingerboard, 18 frets, rosewood bridge, open gear machine heads with ivoroid tuner buttons. Even if it didn't have the identifiable bridge it'd still be a well-crafted, well-inlaid finished guitar great for fingerpicking, especially blues. I also have a Dyer brand guitar made especially for slide, endorsed by the great Roy Smeck. Again it carries the aeroplane bridge but is more plain than the Supertone, which, in the main were made by Harmony but some were also made by Regal, Oscar Schmidt (he of Stella guitars fame) and Stromberg Voisinet.

It was typical in those days for factories to make instruments for other brands so it's not always possible to pinpoint exactly who made what for whom as many instruments do not carry serial numbers.

GIBSON L-SERIES

Of the many excellent acoustic guitars Gibson produced in the early to mid 20th century, the L series were the best, in my opinion, especially the L-00 series. Having said that, most of the Gibson acoustics produced during the aforementioned period were tasty morsels. Roundhole and archtop models were the mainstay of designs. I personally have a 1930s L-4 alongside others. Most of the L-4's were F-hole models but I have a roundhole one. This range was first introduced by Gibson in 1911 and was quite mellow in tone for a 16" body and an oval sound hole. In 1928 they changed the oval soundhole for a round one and increased the neck to 14 frets.

The fretboard end was cantilevered over the table which increased the volume and tone. Gibson were always modifying their guitars over time and in the main, such modifications improved the models.

My L-4 is loud in projection and doesn't have the bass end that the L-0 and L-00s have, but it throws out a strong and strident sound that is good at cutting through other acoustic instruments and is also good for jazz chord and blues fingerpicking.

MARTIN STREETMASTER D-15M AND 000-15M

Alun Lower gets streetwise with this pair of distressed working-musician's guitars

It may come as a surprise from a company that has produced so many different guitars in its time, but the new StreetMaster series is the first time that Martin has offered a 'distressed' finish to any guitar in its lineup (well, aside from some very pricey limited edition models). And no, this isn't about dragging a set of keys over the top and charging another grand on top of the RRP. Rather, Martin has chosen the decidedly more classy approach of ageing the finish to give a more workmanlike appearance, giving you that road worn vibe without making you feel like someone that's just bought a clapped out old banger hidden under an Aston Martin's body. These guitars are firmly pitched by Martin as gigging guitars – the kind that don't need to be handled by a team of latex-gloved roadies every time it's summoned from its case. Indeed, they don't even come with a hardcase – this is gigbag territory, people, and these guitars are meant to be played, with every last drop of tone squeezed out, in the kind of intimate, sweaty venues we all so love to play in.

BUILD QUALITY

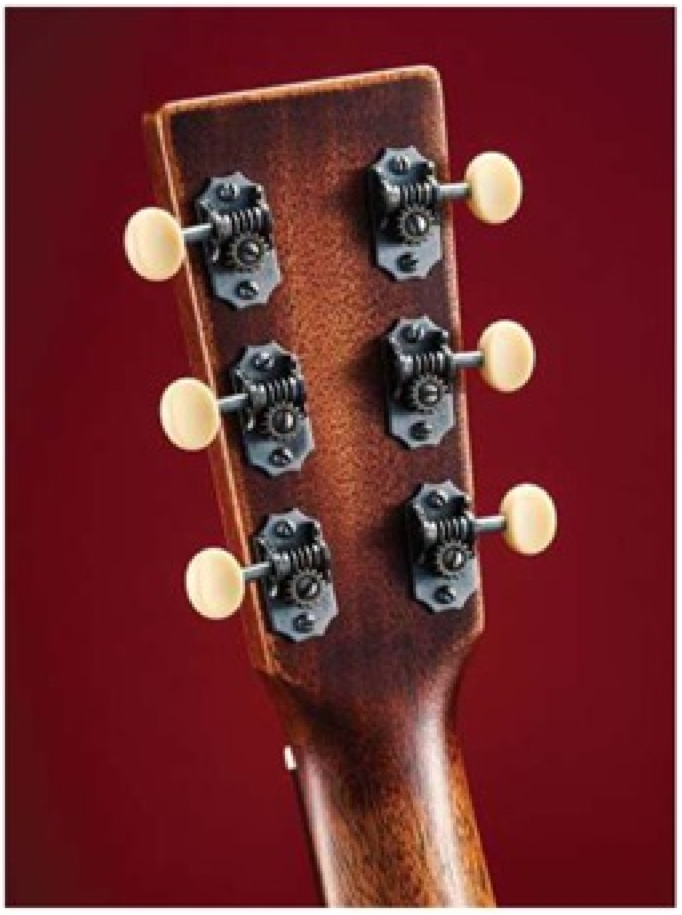
Whatever your thoughts on 'distressed' guitars, I'd challenge anyone out there not to instantly fall in love with the look of these two from the moment you unzip the gigbag. As you can probably tell by the pictures, we're dealing with an all-mahogany construction here, and the worn-looking 'mahogany burst' satin finish is a lovely sight to behold. As I mentioned before, the distressed look really isn't applied too heavily and doesn't mean there are scratches or rough areas on the guitar, it just looks faded in certain areas – close your eyes and you'd have no idea you were handling anything more than simply a very high-quality satin finish. While the majority of the guitar is constructed from mahogany, there are a few exceptions – first up is the bracing, which is constructed from spruce and is a non-scalloped X-braced design. Then there's the fingerboard, which is constructed from Katalox – a Mexican hardwood that is perhaps best described as like ebony, but less fancy-looking. A good fit for the StreetMaster series, then.

"Every note rings out utterly drenched with harmonic overtones"

The neck is carved into what Martin calls a 'Modified low oval' shape, which fits into the hand very nicely, giving you enough material to get a good grip but enough flexibility to enable easy lead playing and superb playability in any position of the neck. The frets too have been expertly fitted and polished to perfection – just what we like to see. Most of us would probably admit that it takes a little bit of time to get used to a different guitar neck, but in this instance it took no time at all. They really are necks that feel like you've played them before, which is a subtly impressive quality to have when first getting to grips with a new guitar.

Elsewhere there are few appointments and flourishes to be found – there are no heel caps, laminate layers of decorative binding or any of those other visual hooks – the wood does the talking, and that's more than enough, as it turns out. Of course, the main difference between the two models here is the body shape, and both feel very comfy in the lap, sitting against the body like an extension of your own ribcage.

If there's one thing I'd question though,



MARTIN D-15M STREETMASTER

NEED TO KNOW

Model: D-15M StreetMaster
RRP: £1499
Made In: USA
Body Size: Dreadnought
Top, Back and Sides: Solid mahogany
Max Rim Depth: 4 7/8" (123.8mm)
Max Body Width: 15 5/8" (396.9mm)
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Katalox
Frets: 20
Bridge: Katalox
Nut Width: 1 11/16" (42.86mm)
Scale Length: 25.4" (645.2mm)
Tuners: Golden Age Relic Nickel
Left Hand Option: Yes
Finishes Available: Satin 'Mahogany Burst'
Gig Bag/Case Included: Yes, gig bag

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Beautiful distressed finish, versatile tones and superb playability
Cons: Lack of electronics may be a drawback for some
Overall: One of the best all-mahogany guitars I've ever tested

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality ✪✪✪✪✪
Build Quality ✪✪✪✪✪
Overall ✪✪✪✪✪

MARTIN 000-15M STREETMASTER

NEED TO KNOW

Model: 000-15M StreetMaster
RRP: £1499
Made In: USA
Body Size: 000
Top, Back and Sides: Solid mahogany
Max Rim Depth: 4 1/8" (104.8mm)
Max Body Width: 15" (381mm)
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Katalox
Frets: 20
Bridge: Katalox
Nut Width: 1 11/16" (42.86mm)
Scale Length: 25.4" (645.2mm)
Tuners: Golden Age Relic Nickel
Left Hand Option: Yes
Finishes Available: Satin 'Mahogany Burst'
Gig Bag/Case Included: Yes, gig bag

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Beautiful distressed finish, great character and superb playability
Cons: Less versatile than its sibling, and lack of electronics
Overall: A lovely guitar – if it suits your playing style then consider this a full 5-star review

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality ✪✪✪✪
Build Quality ✪✪✪✪✪
Overall ✪✪✪✪

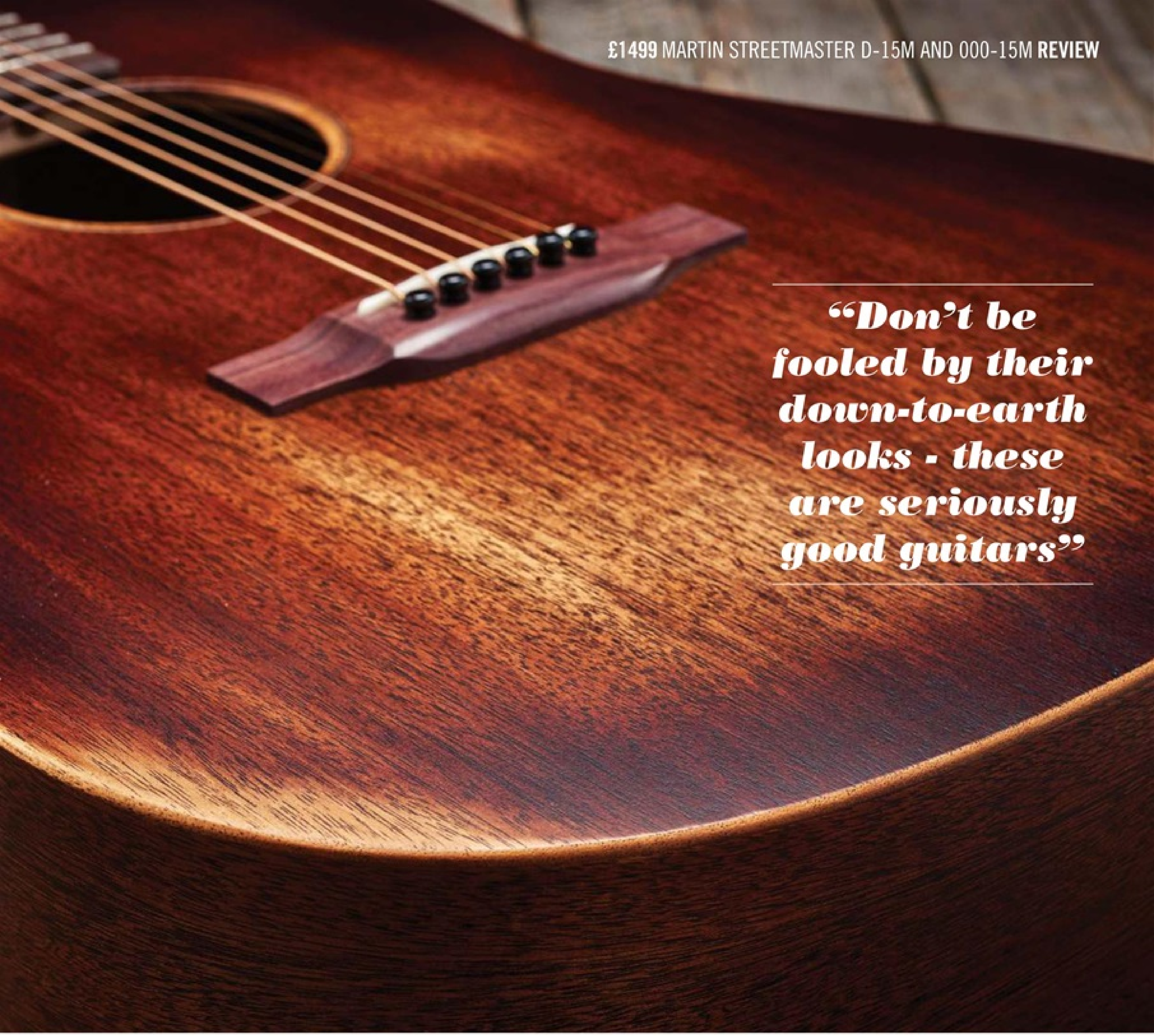
CONTACT DETAILS

www.martinguitar.com

it's a lack of electronics. Martin has very clearly labelled the guitar as a gigging musician's instrument – and while there are a huge amount of potential solutions out there, I'm a bit surprised that there isn't at least the option of having a pickup system pre-installed. The one justification for this though is that the guitars are so different in tone and utility, that I can imagine different guitarists wanting different types of pickup systems depending on what style you're predominantly playing. So whether this will be a dealbreaker or not will be up to you.

SOUND QUALITY

Despite having a fair idea of how any given all-mahogany will perform, truly exceptional examples are still capable of surprising me, and the StreetMasters both fall into this category. I started first with the 000-15M, which is undoubtedly the more divisive of the two guitars. The mahogany construction and superb projection afforded by the 000's construction lend to a loud, distinct and mid-rich voice. If you're looking for a softer, sweeter vibe from your smaller-bodied guitars, this isn't it – and that's where the division lies. It's also not a guitar that is easily applied to different genres – it's not an all-rounder, but that's no bad thing. There's a certain mid-range 'honk' to my ears, and after my initial surprise, my eyes lit up with excitement as I realised what this guitar would be so good at – slide. Shift to an open tuning and this guitar zings and howls with the best of them, in a gloriously Robert Johnson-esque way. The emphasis is understandably on the mids and trebles here, and you really should take advantage of that. Aside from its obvious strengths with blues and slide, I have the feeling that



"Don't be fooled by their down-to-earth looks - these are seriously good guitars"

the 000-15M will also pair exceptionally well with other blues and folk instruments. Mandolins, banjos, upturned bins – you name it – this is a six-stringer with serious attitude and while the tone won't be to everyone's tastes, it's a hell of a lot of fun.

The D-15M, by comparison, is much less extreme a voice but turned out to be equally surprising for me. With all-mahogany guitars you often expect to get a somewhat narrow tonal spectrum. Mids with a bit of snap and a soft low end. The D-15M however turns this expectation on its head, and I was really surprised with just how dynamic and soulful a voice this guitar has. Every note rings out utterly drenched with harmonic overtones. Strumming and fingerpicking both sounded fantastic, and while the usual dread qualities are there, and the mahogany does indeed mean that the mid-frequencies lead the show, it doesn't end there (unlike so many mahogany instruments). It just goes that little bit further, and it's wonderful. This is a guitar with soul and sensitivity, able to be pushed to its limits while still sounding crystal clear and vibrant, but also possessing enough subtlety and versatility to be dialled down to a small, intimate performance in just about any style.

CONCLUSION

Don't be fooled by their humble, down-to-earth looks – the StreetMaster D-15M and 000-15M are seriously good guitars that pack a whole heap of surprises up their well-worn sleeves. After assuming I knew exactly what I was getting into when reviewing these guitars, by the end I felt like I'd seen a street magician pull an elephant out of a discarded crisp packet. They look stunning, are as playable as any guitar you could ever hope to lay your hands on, and possess a staggering variety of tones between them to cover all sorts of musical genres and add extra colour to your playing. Their unpretentious, road-worn looks invite you to connect with them and lose yourself in the moment, without that worry of more ornate instruments that your errant strumming may scratch the glass-like gloss protecting some glamorous tonewood beneath. The only real bump in the road comes from the lack of electronics. Of the two guitars, I found that the D-15M offered a more all-round and versatile experience tonally, which is why I've awarded it the extra star on this occasion. But make no mistake, the 000-15M is an equally impressive guitar, and if its up-front, bluesy tones are music to your ears then you should absolutely consider that a full 5-star review as well. ■

GUILD M-240E TROUBADOUR

Will Guild's new folkie tribute hit the spot? Andy Pritchard digs out his loons and tie-dye to find out

Whenever I think of Guild Guitars, what comes to mind are merhusive dreadnoughts, John Denver hiding behind a whopping great 12-string, or Richie Havens, giving it large opening at Woodstock on a D40. But they also had a devoted following, particularly among the 1960s folkies, for their smaller bodied F range. Since those halcyon days, the company has changed hands many times with production moving around as a result. Now under the Cordoba Music Group umbrella, production is in Oxnard, California, with some of the cheaper models, this being one of them, made in China. Whenever you pick up a guitar that says 'designed in California', you can guess that production itself is a long, long way from there. Just a sign of the times I guess. This particular cheeky chappie is a tribute to the F 20, so let's dive in. First impressions are always important and in fact the first impression with this one was how light the box was when the DPD delivery man handed it to me at the door: I thought they'd forgot to put the guitar in!

BUILD QUALITY

Nevertheless, cosily ensconced inside was this lovely looking little fella. Finished in a tobacco-like vintage sunburst, and with the tortoiseshell pickguard being echoed on the pickup face, this is a strikingly original yet reassuringly retro looking beastie.

Let's start at the top. The iconic Guild headstock shape is here in all its glory with the company legend inlaid in mother of pearl. The nickel-plated open geared machine heads are branded Guild, have a 14:1 ratio and are smooth and reliable, as you'd expect. The neck is mahogany and has the Guild C shape profiling, being topped by an Indian rosewood fingerboard with micro-dot fret markers. Nut and saddle are both made of bone with the 20-fret fretboard joining the body at the 15th fret. Moving onto the body itself the top is solid Sitka spruce with an arched laminated mahogany back and sides. Interestingly the mahogany used in the neck is noticeably lighter than that used in the body. The bridge mirrors the rosewood of the fingerboard with cream, dotted bridge pins that match the bone saddle, colour wise. Guild describe the finish as "thin resonate satin polyurethane" and very pleasing it is too. In particular the sunburst finish has an evenness to the blending not always seen, particularly at this price point. Cream binding with a black pinstripe, finishes the top off nicely and is also seen around the soundhole bordering a solitary mother of pearl inlaid rosette. A tortoiseshell pickguard adds to the retro feel, which, as previously mentioned, is mirrored on the face of the DeArmond Tone Boss pickup. To return to Guild's words, they describe this as "a user friendly humbucking magnetic soundhole pickup with built in volume control that is compatible with any amplifier." Looks-wise, at least, it does help the Troubadour stand apart from the competition. Looking in the soundhole there is the rather unnerving, but to be expected, experience of seeing no struts on the arched back (so that's why it felt so light) while the top has scalloped X-bracing.

"This is a strikingly original yet reassuringly retro looking beastie"

SOUND QUALITY

So what does it play like? OK, the neck is comfortable in the hand and the action low, but unfortunately too low as all the strings

buzz on the first fret and some higher up as well. This is a shame as you can tell there is a great tone in there with the arched back giving appreciable projection. I thought I'd tweak the truss bar to see if I could improve it but access is blocked by the pickup and I didn't want to start disassembling the thing. If you were buying this from a decent guitar shop, this would be picked before it got as far as the hanger, but it needs to be borne in mind if you were buying online. The frets themselves felt quite high when sliding up and down the neck; this may hark back to the retro 60s thing when fretwire was often narrower and higher, or my fingers might have gone soft from too much washing up...

GUILD M-240E TROUBADOUR

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Guild
Model: M-240E Troubadour
RRP: £445
Body Size: Compact concert
Made In: China
Top: Solid sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Laminated mahogany
Max Rim Depth: 4 9/64" (105mm)
Max Body Width: 13 55/64" (352mm)
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 20
Bridge: Rosewood
Nut Width: 1 11/16" (42.86mm)
Scale Length: 24 23/32" (628mm)
Weight: 4lb 4oz (1.8kg)
Onboard Electrics: DeArmond Tone Boss soundhole pickup
Controls: None
Tuners: Guild nickel vintage open gears 14:1
Finishes Available: Vintage Sunburst
Gig Bag/Case Included: Yes

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Retro looks, archback tone
Cons: Fret buzz, pickup balance
Overall: Worth checking out at this price point

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality
Sound Quality
Overall

CONTACT DETAILS

www.guildguitars.com

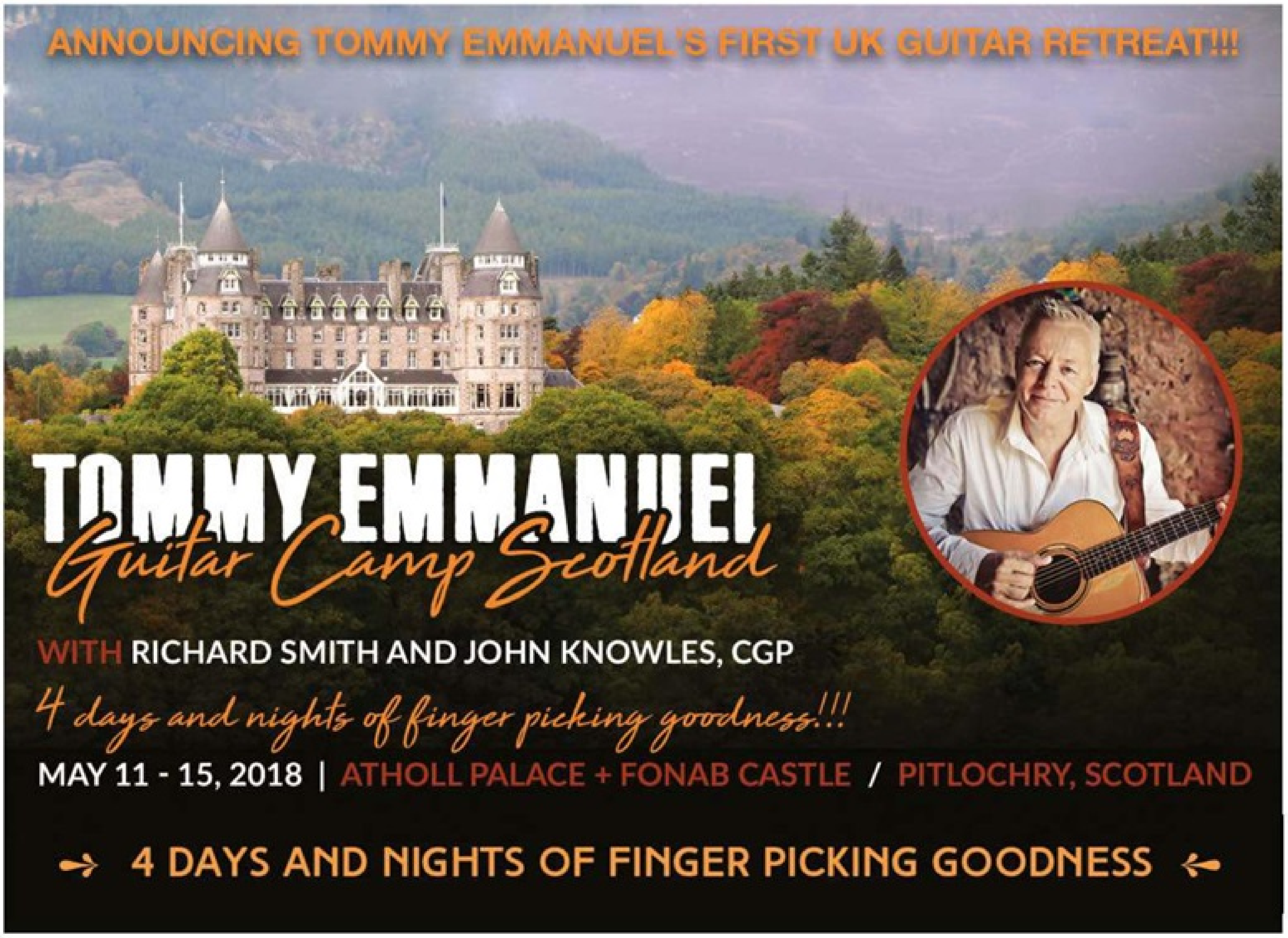
> ***"This is a guitar that makes a statement with its looks"***

Concentrating on playing chords further up the neck there is a warmth to the tone that belies its price tag with great clarity and balance. I do like it. The compact concert body sits on your lap very comfortably but on this particular guitar, the buzzing is too distracting.

I was curious to know what I'd hear when I plugged in the head-scratchingly described 'user friendly' pickup but I have to say it wasn't particularly pleasing to my palette. Bass light to my ears, the top two strings are much louder than the rest although the expected humbucker fatness and warmth is there. Inroads can be made using the EQ on the amp and it's probably better to think of it as a different sound rather than a reflection of the unplugged tone. It's interesting that in the demo video the guy fingerpicks for half of it then sticks it through a tube amp and a distortion pedal to show its 'versatility'. Call me old fashioned but if I was trying to show off the plugged-in sound of an acoustic, I'd put some strumming in before all that. Saying that it sounds really good filthy; perhaps I'm just a cynic.

CONCLUSION

If your budget is around the £450 mark and you're looking for something a bit different then definitely go and try the Troubadour. There is something sneakily beguiling about it and that arched back definitely gives a unique tone. It's a guitar that makes a statement with its looks and if that fits your image, the hipsters will love it. Obviously given the buzzing issues I encountered I'd suggest, as I said earlier, buying in a shop rather than online. But given the overall build quality and Guilds reputation I can only think I was unfortunate. ■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FENDER CT-140SE

A travel-sized Fender – complete with preamp – for only £345? I'll take two, says Joel McIver

Getting a Fender acoustic travel guitar to market must be a bit like juggling an ever-increasing number of live hand-grenades. First, the instrument has to be small, ideally small enough to get into a mid-sized case. It's also got to be pretty tough, though – 'travel' generally implies 'being knocked about a lot'.

Then, the requisite spec and playability has to be there, with the usual eco-friendly considerations to take into account. After that, the guitar has to retail at a reasonable RRP, with distributors taking their cut and everybody walking away with a profit. Once all that is in place, said axe has to live up to the expectations that guitarists have of Fender, the best-known brand on the planet. Drop any of these grenades and boom, it's all over, with guitarists opting to buy a rival instrument, perhaps made by a company whose name begins with G.

With all this in mind, when we pull the new Fender CT-140SE out of its hardshell case, there's a certain weight of expectation filling the room – and no, that's not just the smell of boiling strings. Can the mighty F corporation deliver a guitar that is small, playable, high-quality and with a pricetag situated firmly at the bottom end of the market? There's only one way to find out...

BUILD QUALITY

Just so that we're completely clear from the outset of this review, £330 is literally around a tenth of the cost of the top echelon of acoustics which we review in this magazine. A tenth. Sure, the CT is a mass-produced instrument made in Indonesia, or 'crafted' in that country as the in-body certificate amusingly puts it, but I literally can't find any assembly flaws anywhere on the guitar. And believe me I've tried, from the smoothly functional tuners all the way down to the rear strap button.

Much of the attraction of the CT comes from its neck and fingerboard, with eminently playable rolled edges that practically beg you to play barre chords. The rear neck finish is smooth, but not so slick as to impede your grasp, while the absence of a scratchplate on the body keeps the instrument's look clean. The sturdily finished body itself is unlikely to suffer from the absence of a scratchplate, unless you go 'full Gomm' and start beating it up.

> **"Its eminently playable rolled edges practically beg you to play barre chords"**

The finer details have been taken care of admirably, with two strap buttons – the rear of which is also the jack socket – and a Graph Tech saddle on the bridge, which features dedicated angled rest points for the first and second strings. These presumably assist the narrower-gauge strings with extra tension, which makes you ask yourself how often you'd expect to see that level of detail for the cost of petrol from London to Glasgow and back.

Okay, if we really have to be petty, I'd say that when you address the 14 accessible frets, the spacing between them from the ninth and above might feel a little narrow. That's an inevitable consequence of the 23.75" scale that comes with a travel guitar. If you have fingers the size of Cumberland sausages, like this reviewer, perhaps consider a larger instrument. For everyone else, the neck will feel just dandy.

SOUND QUALITY

Unplugged, the CT sounds perfectly acceptable for its body size. Mids and top end are where it's happiest. Note that super-glassy treble that will kill cows at 100 paces is not its forte, and the same goes for the low end: by virtue of the instrument's body size, serious bass is not available unamplified. That's why they installed a preamp, evidently – because on plugging in and rolling on the two-band EQ's bass boost, you're rewarded with enough of the big sounds to suit any small- to medium-sized room.

Sustain is generally excellent, although – as referenced above – everything starts to perform a little less well as you progress to the upper half of the neck. Again, this is what you'd expect from a short-scale instrument. Instead,

strum some full-fat chords near the nut and you'll achieve a warm, meaty tone that you can modulate easily enough by applying your pick near the bridge.

Inevitably, the short scale means that it's less easy to dig in by the soundhole and then by the bridge and hope to pull off a wide range of tones; travel guitars simply aren't designed that way. You'll definitely coax a totally usable mids-heavy tone from this instrument, though.

Switch to fingerpicking, and the expected subtle warmth and organic response is there. Work with the short scale by incorporating open strings and the guitar will reward you; tune to drop D, drop C or DADGAD and the CT pretty much jumps up and thanks you, adding much-needed extra bass.

If the CT hadn't been equipped with a preamp, it would still have been a reasonable

FENDER CT-140SE

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Fender
Model: CT-140SE
RRP: £345
Body Size: Travel
Made In: Indonesia
Top: Solid spruce
Back and Sides: Laminated rosewood
Max Rim Depth: 7 9/32" (185mm)
Max Body Width: 17 51/64" (452mm)
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood, Graph Tech nut
Frets: 20, 14 accessible
Bridge: Rosewood, Graph Tech saddles
Nut Width: 1 11/16" (43mm)
Scale Length: 23 1/2" (597mm)
Weight: 4lb (1.8kg)
Onboard Electrics: Fishman® Presys Pickup System with Active Onboard Preamp and Tuner
Controls: Volume, Treble, Mid, Bass, Phase
Tuners: Chrome die-cast
Finishes Available: Natural or Sunburst
Gig Bag/Case Included: Hardshell case

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Volume and sustain impressive; preamp excellent
Cons: Lack of extreme top and bottom end
Overall: A Fender of this quality for only £345? Take our money!

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality:
Sound Quality:
Overall:

CONTACT DETAILS

www.fender.com

purchase at this price – so the inclusion of Fishman's Presys unit is a genuine bonus. It's hardly a complex interface, with bass, treble and volume controls, plus a tuner, low battery LED and phase button, but how much more do you really need? I always find that the graphic equaliser sliders that you get on more expensive systems fill up with dust, sweat or beer at some point anyway. What matters is what's under the hood, especially for an instrument that doesn't naturally have much volume or a wide tone range, so take full advantage of the tone-shaping and boost functions at your fingertips.

The on-board tuner does a workable rather than scintillating job. I found I could tune the guitar faster using my ears than with this slightly slow-to-respond gizmo. Then again, I was testing this guitar in the comfort of a home office with a cup of tea nearby, not on a pitch-black stage. It's always good to have automated tuning help, no matter how advanced you are.

Talking of stage-friendliness, you know those little round batteries that are a bit like five-pence coins? Pop out the battery compartment from this guitar too fast and they'll roll under the drum kit in microseconds, leaving your gig blown and the crowd ready to murder you. So keep backups handy, don't try and change them in a rush, and keep an eye on the nearest exit.

"If Fender didn't need their review model back, I'd be hanging onto it"

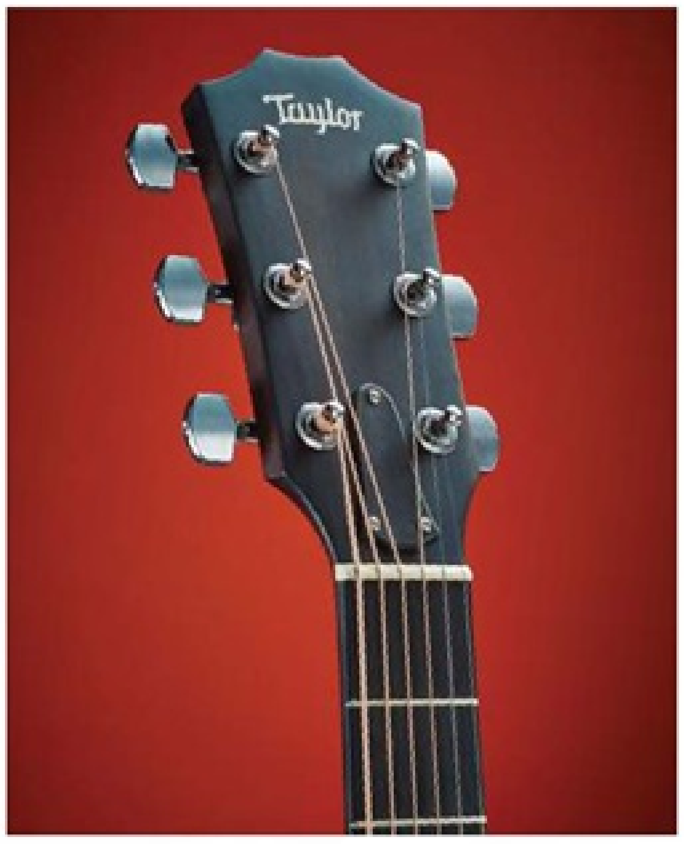
Mounted on a strap or placed on your lap, the CT balances comfortably, with its slender-ish body unlikely to chafe the forearm of your picking hand. It's super-playable, and despite its price point everything somehow feels right. Whatever they put in the drinking water over at Fender's Indonesian HQ, we'd like some.

CONCLUSION

If Fender didn't need their review model back, I'd be hanging onto it ready for my next gig. Sure, the body is smaller than those of the CT's bigger siblings, and you don't get anywhere near as much bottom end as a dreadnought, for example – but this instrument's quality is high, its playability is off the chart and you can even plug it in. If the CT cost £600 or £700, I'd still regard it as a decent investment, but for ££345? I want one. Make that two! ■

TAYLOR 214CE-CF DLX

There is a reason the big winners keep on winning, as Huw Hopkins found out when he played Taylor's new copafera-backed 200 series



Whether you like it or not, we need big names, heavy-hitters, and recognisable faces. Take sports, for example. When Manchester United fail to make an impression in the Premier League, or the Los Angeles Lakers aren't riding high in the NBA, the entire league seems to, well, lose something. The world of music is no different. While everybody enjoys finding a little something that nobody else has discovered, you need the Foo Fighters, the Eminems, the Beyonces and the Adeles of this world to make triumphant returns every few years. And, of course, musical instruments are the same. Yes, you need custom builders, budget manufacturers and the unusual brands to come up with unique products, but life is always best, especially in the world of guitars, when companies like Taylor are involved.

Under the trusty helm of Bob Taylor and Kurt Listug, Taylor has long been known for innovation, but, as *Acoustic* found out a few months ago, the company's future plans are to use specialist wood that is cut and produced in responsible ways. Interesting times are clearly ahead for this giant in the acoustic guitar world.

BUILD QUALITY

Within the bottom of the 214CE-CF is a strap holster that doubles as a jack plug for when you want to go electric. The layered copafera in which the holster sits is where the CF designation comes from, and this makes up a bulk of Taylor's relaunched range of 200 Deluxe models. The wood is matched on the back, and here is where you can appreciate its true beauty.

Following CITES restrictions on rosewood, the American company announced that the 200 series of Taylors would feature copafera, instead of the previous rosewood. Copafera is a layered texture of African wood, including a middle core of poplar, which helps keep costs affordable and the guitar durable. Aside from it being a great decision for business and the environment, it looks superb: the rich, coffee-chocolate look shimmers with figure in light. There is a Venetian cutaway that creates a divine look, while allowing great access to easy playing up to 14 frets, though you can reach further up to 20 should you decide to play some lead lines in an acoustic group, a setting which would suit this model quite well.

> **"The rich, coffee-chocolate look shimmers with figure in light"**

Back on the top, the Sitka spruce pops from the moment you open the hard guitar case. A well-shaped tortoise pickguard sits on the glossed wood, and joins a single ring around the soundhole that boasts a jewelled effect.

The bridge has a sleek, curved design where six black pins hold the strings in place. The strings shoot up over the top of a micarta saddle toward the head, but in-between the saddle and the pins are three small sensors that act as the catalyst for Taylor's revamped Expression System 2.

A tropical mahogany neck is capped with a white wood on the heel, but the same single piece of mahogany creates a smooth line up to the head. The fretboard is made from West African ebony. It features 20 frets with diamond-shaped inlays on three, five, seven, nine, 12, 15 and 17.

The Elixir Phosphor Bronze Light strings stretch over the Tusq nut and past the scarf neck joint to the respective tuners, which are finished in satin. Taylor's Colorcore logo stands out on the headstock, a clear marque that is a welcome sight to guitar fans.

SOUND QUALITY

At 11.7cm, the depth of the body on this Deluxe Taylor looks slightly flat when you first take it out of the hardshell case, but don't let that put you off. The Grand Auditorium size is Taylor's most popular for a reason, and there is no missing the low end on a hearty E major. But when Bob Taylor developed the shape in the early 1990s, he intended for it to offer the perfect midrange sound for singer-songwriters, while also featuring some nice treble when you pluck the higher strings.

Spoiler alert: all of the above is still there. If anything, you appreciate the shallow depth as it allows you to get the guitar closer to your body for a greater look at the neck and body when you're learning and writing additions to your repertoire. In terms of hearing the difference between copafera and a typical rosewood, there was none. A better trained ear in a scientific scenario where the two guitars were next to each other may have felt the new wood layers are slightly sharper than a original warmer rosewood, but if you're picking up a guitar for the first time with no knowledge of the change, it is unlikely you would be put off by what you're hearing. It picks out individual notes well, even when played among a series of chords. An occasional use of power chords among open finger style does not give any depreciation in quality.

TAYLOR 214CE-CF DLX

NEED TO KNOW

RRP: £949
Body Size: Grand Auditorium
Made In: USA
Top: Sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Layered copafera
Max Rim Depth: 4 5/8" (117mm)
Max Body Width: 16" (406mm)
Neck: Tropical mahogany
Fingerboard: West African ebony
Frets: 20
Nut Width: 1 11/16" (43mm)
Scale Length: 25-1/2" (635mm)
Weight: 2kg
Onboard Electrics: Expression System 2
Controls: Tone and volume
Tuners: Standard
Left Hand Option: Yes, no extra cost
Finishes Available: Glossed
Gig Bag/Case Included: Yes

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A real pleasure to play
Cons: Clearer definition about what control does what
Overall: Life is better when there is a good Taylor guitar in your life, and for this guitar, at this price, you won't go wrong

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality: 5/5
Sound Quality: 4/5
Overall: 4/5

CONTACT DETAILS

www.taylorguitars.com

> **"There isn't a lot about Taylor's re-up on the 214 that I don't like"**

Elixir's Lights are my preferred choice and made playing this 200 series model suitable for my style. I even became inspired enough to write some new material, which doesn't happen all that often when you hit your peak in creativity some 15 years ago.

When plugged in to an amplifier, the new-feel Expression System did its job. The sensors are able to pick up on the strings' fuller range of movement thanks to their position behind the saddle. I fiddled with the three volume and tone controls, with the best results coming from the left nob in dead centre and the other two slightly past the centre point. One preference would be to have numbers and a descriptor for each control: it's easy enough to know what the volume is, but it would also be good to have a feel for what you're changing when you're changing it.

CONCLUSIONS

There isn't a lot about Taylor's re-up on the 214 that I don't like. Its looks are to die for, it's easy to play and the sound is among the best I've heard – unplugged or electric.

As a new version in the 200 range, it's a privilege to have been one of the first to play this Venetian cutaway model in the UK. I'll struggle to give it back, and I'd highly recommend those who work their guitars hard to invest in one. Every guitar collection is made better with a Taylor, but your Taylor collection would be bettered with the 214ce-CF DLX. ■

> *"The sound was so precise it was like the amplifier vanished into the ether"*

HUGHES & KETTNER ERA 1 AMP

The acoustic amp: contradiction in terms? Olly McGhie finds out on this expert-backed new model from Hughes & Kettner

Nothing is more oxymoronic than an acoustic amplifier. By their nature they shouldn't exist. This odd dilemma filters down to their reputation in the music-verse. They tend to crackle, hum and give a variety of sounds that don't quite match the sound of the instrument you're playing. Good ones might provide some subtle effects to aid your musical performance, while others produce a sound so far from the original instrument that it's like playing in unison with a crinkled, distorted doppleganger.

A recent collaboration has sought to change this, though. Hughes and Kettner (known for producing high quality digital signal processing) joined forces with audio-technologist-cum-engineer, Michael Eisenmann (a former member of the team at AER, who helped design the Acousticube) to develop Hughes and Kettner's first acoustic amplifier.

Eisenmann describes Era 1 as, "an extremely versatile tool for amplifying acoustic instruments, even for complicated instruments like the violin and perhaps even traditional Asian instruments, which is a big market. It takes the concept of being small, loud, easy to use and very dynamic to a whole new level… It uses a closed speaker system – one that doesn't produce the noises commonly found with bass reflex designs."

The whole concept behind this Hughes & Kettner Era 1 model is that it amplifies the natural sound of the acoustic guitar. A spokesperson from Music and Sales, a company which aids in the distribution of the amplifier, says, "We aim towards a customer who usually shies away from amps as she knows they colour her tone too much. The Era 1 does not! The EQ/Mode works a certain way (not at all like a normal EQ – much more subtle as we want to keep the natural tone of the guitar being used)."

The model I have has a dark, wooden finish (though black is also available). It comes with a plush carry bag, which has a pocket for the power cable, and a tilt stand so you can angle it skywards. The design is extremely tidy. The handle is sturdy and chunky, but the weight of the amplifier is significant. I wouldn't want to carry it too far with a guitar in tow as well.

A little inset ledge at the back of the top is the sound control station. It offers two channels, both of which take two completely different sources (xlr and ¼ jack) and render them both individually. There are 16 FX settings, which are detailed in the instruction manual, though not described on the amplifier itself. While this adds to the minimalist, austere aesthetic, it does mean, initially, you will be glued to the manual ascribing the sound to the setting – though the FX offered are of the standard variety. This may sound a little worrying for those in performance environments who might need to switch distinct sounds quickly between tracks on a darkened stage, but there is the option to programme in your own sound.

On the back of the amp it has outputs for mixing desk, phones and another line. In addition there are inputs for tuner, footswitch, FX loop and more [see our spec box]. It's all very comprehensive.

As recommended by one of the team at Music and Sales, I test the amplifier with a similarly priced instrument. The UK retail price for Era 1 is £1189. My seagull of choice is a Furch G21 SW on sale at £1235. Without any amplification it has a huge, bright and natural sound so it almost seemed a shame to add amplification. When paired with the Era 1, it's outstanding. The sound was so precise it was like the amplifier vanished into the ether. There's plenty of volume from the Era 1 too, perfect for pub gigs all the way up to a medium sized concert hall.

When taking the FX through their paces the Furch responded amiably. I won't describe all 16, but the presets cover the most well-known sounds from reverb, delay, chorus to flanger – with a few variations thereof. They give you enough variety to be playing well into the small hours without losing interest and the FX volume dial lets you turn the effect down if it's too much for you. Of the 16 presets, my highlights include: 'Delay Short', which produces a sweet blues sound, emphasising just the right amount of buzz; an atmospheric 'Reverb Hall Bright', though I wouldn't recommend chordal playing in this mode (stick to solos), and 'Flanger + Delay' (my

least favourite sound) in which everything I play sounds a microtone out (and then, as if I'm being tortured, I have to hear it again). Online there are some superb examples of how these presets can best be wielded and it's well worth checking out. One slight glitch in an otherwise faultless FX setup is that two of the 'Delay' presets cannot be used separately on both channels and the FX volume affects both channels. What situation would require two bespoke delay effects I'm not sure, but it's probably worth mentioning.

While these presets might add something extra to your performance, and are as high quality as I can tell, the most impressive sound for me is without any effects (or with perhaps an ounce of reverb). Its neutral playing ground lends itself well across multiple genres of playing, classical especially, but more on that later.

Where the amplifier excels in audio excellence and mimicry of your guitar sound, this is possibly also its greatest downfall. I pick a reasonable budget guitar: in this case a Sigma Coome retailing at £225. Without amplification it seems fine, possibly sounding a little more than it's worth. But the Era 1 laid bare its dynamic range, even picking up on a more boxy, closed sound, hidden when played without such accurate amplification. The effects helped to mask the limited dynamic range but there's only so much reverb effect you can put on before you're drowning in your own sound. Therein lies the rub.

Harking back to Michael Eisenmann's comments about the variety of instruments, which can be used with this amp I also try it with a Freshman cedar ukulele and a Cordoba Fusion Spruce nylon-stringed guitar. The Era 1 picks up on the finer nuances of the uke sound, recreating the natural percussive treble with relative ease, though I did push the bass slightly in the EQ on the amp. The Cordoba combined with the Era 1 fulfills one of my main ambitions in life – playing in a cathedral venue (by maxing out the Reverb Church preset). The nylon strings, however, don't feel as immediate as steel strings and I wonder whether putting a microphone to the guitar might yield better results. Referring back to manual I'm tipped off that nylon strings sound better on channel 2, so I switch. The results are worth it.

CONCLUSION

This amp is designed for the advanced instrument. Budget models won't get the most from its sophisticated capabilities. By extension this amp is probably more for the advanced player, or an aficionado with the traditional and accurate acoustic sound in mind. The two channels are extremely useful components on this amplifier. It can become the engine for two sparring musicians, the troubadour travelling tool, or the device to boost your acoustic sound in a large ensemble. ■

HUGHES & KETTNER ERA 1 AMP

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Hughes & Kettner
Model: Era 1
RRP: £1189
Power supply: Mains
Power Consumption: 250 watts
Dimensions (w/h/d) : 351 x 285 x 290 mm
Net Weight: 9.85kg / 21.7lbs (wood), 10.75kg / 23.7 lbs
Frequency response: 40 – 180 Hz
Features: Tilt stand (25-35°); protective padded cover; speakers: 1x 8" woofer, 1x 1" tweeter; 2x identical channels with combined XLR/jack inputs; switchable phantom power supply; -10 dB, shape en mute buttons; gain control; 3-band EQ with two modes (steel-string & nylon-string); FX engine with 16 programs (reverb, chorus, flanger, etc.) and adjustable parameters; channel 3: aux input (stereo mini jack); channel 4: FX loop (stereo jack); master section: volume and notch filter; FX loop; DI-out (switchable pre/post EQ); stereo line-out; footswitch, tuner and headphone socket; optical recording out (S/PDIF-Toslink).

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

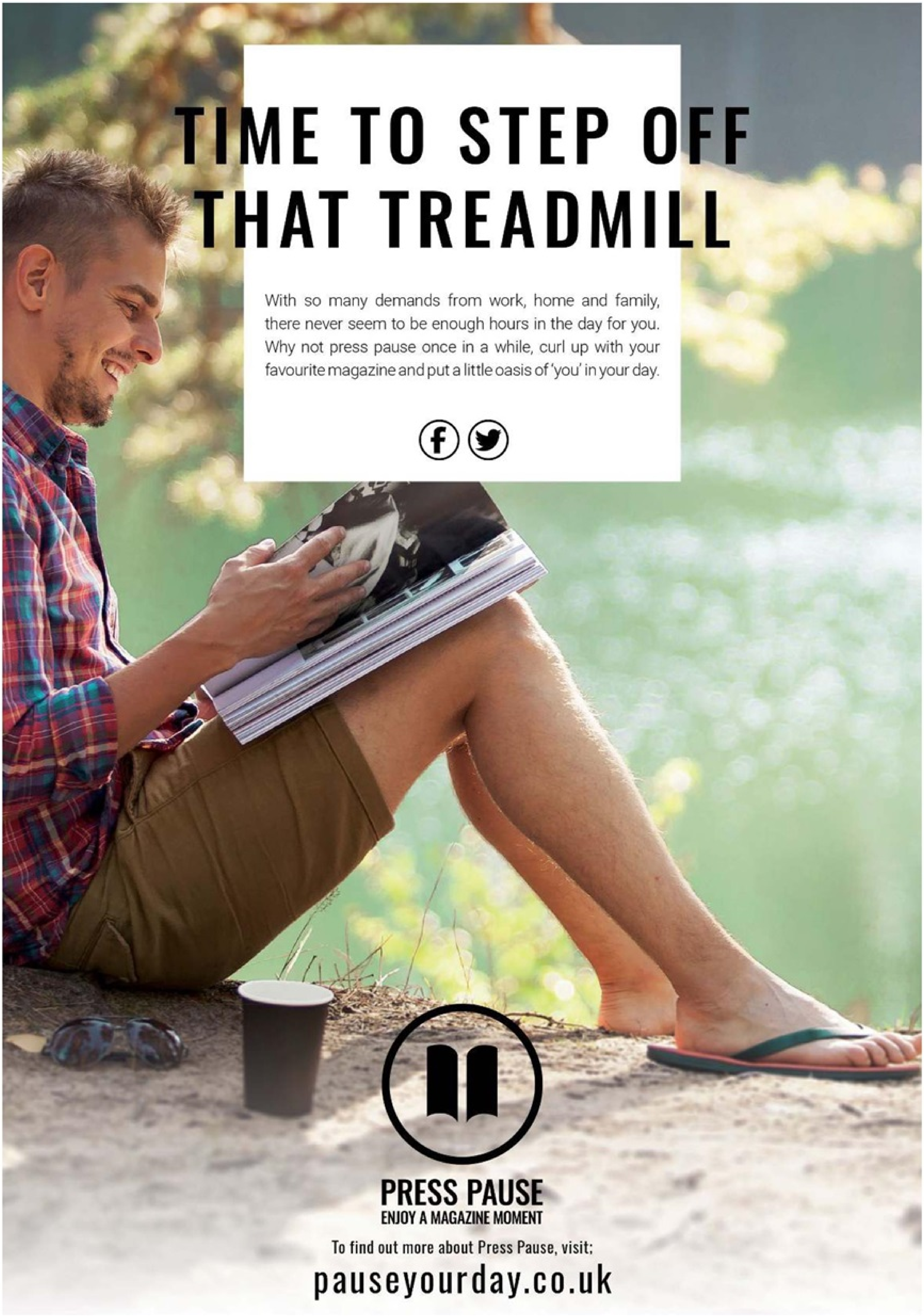
Pros: The perfect companion for singer-songwriters
Cons: Weighty; amplifies the smallest details
Overall: No signature tonal style here – just a clean, professional rendering of your guitar, but louder.

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality: ★★★★★
Sound Quality: ★★★★★
Overall: ★★★★☆

CONTACT DETAILS

www.jhs.co.uk
www.hughes-and-kettner.com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JAY LICHTY

We chat to the North Carolina-based luthier to learn more about his impeccable craftsmanship

WORDS: EMILY BIELBY

It was ukuleles, not guitars, that first inspired Jay Lichty on the path of luthiery. "I became enamoured with ukulele and wanted to get a custom one made but decided to try and build one myself instead," explains Jay. "I really enjoyed the process and that first instrument that I made turned out great; until I built that first ukulele I had never really given building instruments much thought."

Admiring the work of Wayne Henderson, Linda Manzer, Ervin Somogyi, Tom Ribbecke, Kent Everett, Eric Divine and Robbie O'Brian, Lichty learnt his lutherie skills watching Youtube videos and reading how-to books, but he was also fortunate to attend a guitar-building workshop facilitated by Virginia luthier Wayne Henderson, where he honed his skills as a luthier. "That was a 10-day workshop where each of the four participants built a dreadnought guitar. I immediately took to Wayne's style of building and that is when the bug really bit and I decided to get more serious about the craft," explains Jay.

The first guitar Jay ever made was a D-18 copy that he built in the workshop with Wayne Henderson. "It sounds pretty good for a first build and I still have it, although it never gets played," he explains.

Lichty builds both steel and nylon string guitars and also archtop guitars and ukuleles. "Although I build crossover nylon string guitars, I have not tried to build a traditional classical guitar. I do enjoy and have learned a lot on building traditional models; however, I get more satisfaction out of my own designs and I don't have the personality to copy the work of others. That said, I am not above borrowing some great ideas and techniques," admits Jay.

His building technique is fairly straightforward and minimalistic, but Lichty is always interested in learning about new building techniques: "Since I build such a variety of styles, I don't use a lot of jigs and fixtures in my work. I typically build one instrument at a time but of course there is a crossover of builds in the finish and curing stages. I find that by building one at a time, I am better able to keep up with the natural desire of the woods and how they want to (or don't want to) become a guitar. I am fairly organised in my methods due to my long experience as a homebuilder and this keeps things flowing smoothly for the most part. I am always interested in new building techniques and this craft is one where there is always something new to learn."

Over the course of his luthiery career, Lichty has built 110 guitars, 125 ukuleles and one fiddle; but it's his archtop that he's most proud of. "The archtop builds are quite a bit more challenging than a typical flat top guitar build. I love the process and they definitely test my skills," he says.

DUST, MAGIC AND MUSIC…

The Tryon-born craftsman talks me through a standard day in his workshop. "I am typically in the shop from 8am until 6pm, six days a week. Fortunately, although I work hard, it doesn't feel like 'work'. There is no set schedule; only doing whatever task is in front of me. I do not like to waste time so I am always thinking several steps down the line to minimise that."

"Like most crafts people the design starts in my head," says Lichty. "I spend a lot of my down time looking at pictures and videos online to get ideas and inspiration. Sometimes my wife and partner, Corrie Woods, and I just pick through woods and components to come up with ideas and go from there. Of course I get a lot of ideas from our customers. Once the design is in place then I will build the instrument in my head. Then comes the actual making of dust… and magic… and music."

The actual building is a one-man job for Lichty Guitars; however, the business takes both Woods and Lichty. "I am a typical artist so I'm pretty useless when it comes to marketing. Corrie takes care of that as well as the photography/video and website design and execution." Although it's a one-man job, Lichty can typically have a guitar out of the door a month from when he starts building it, which is a pretty quick turnaround time.

Since he started out in 2009, Lichty has won an award with *Guitar & Gun* magazine, naming Lichty Guitars the overall winner of the 'Made in the South' awards and has had his instruments featured in numerous exhibits in and around North Carolina, and the States. "'Birds of a Feather' was an exhibit in Wilmington, NC and featured a series of instruments I built that each were hand-painted by NC artist Clark Hipolito. 'Handcrafted Melodies' was an exhibit of specifically NC-crafted instruments in Shelby, NC. Upstairs Artspace in Tryon has exhibited my guitars in their gallery as part of the annual Open Studio Tour. I've also exhibited at numerous trade shows like the Memphis Acoustic Guitar Festival and the Guild of American Luthiers Convention. In November, there will be a ukulele on exhibit in Honolulu as part of the Luthiers for a Cause project," he explains.

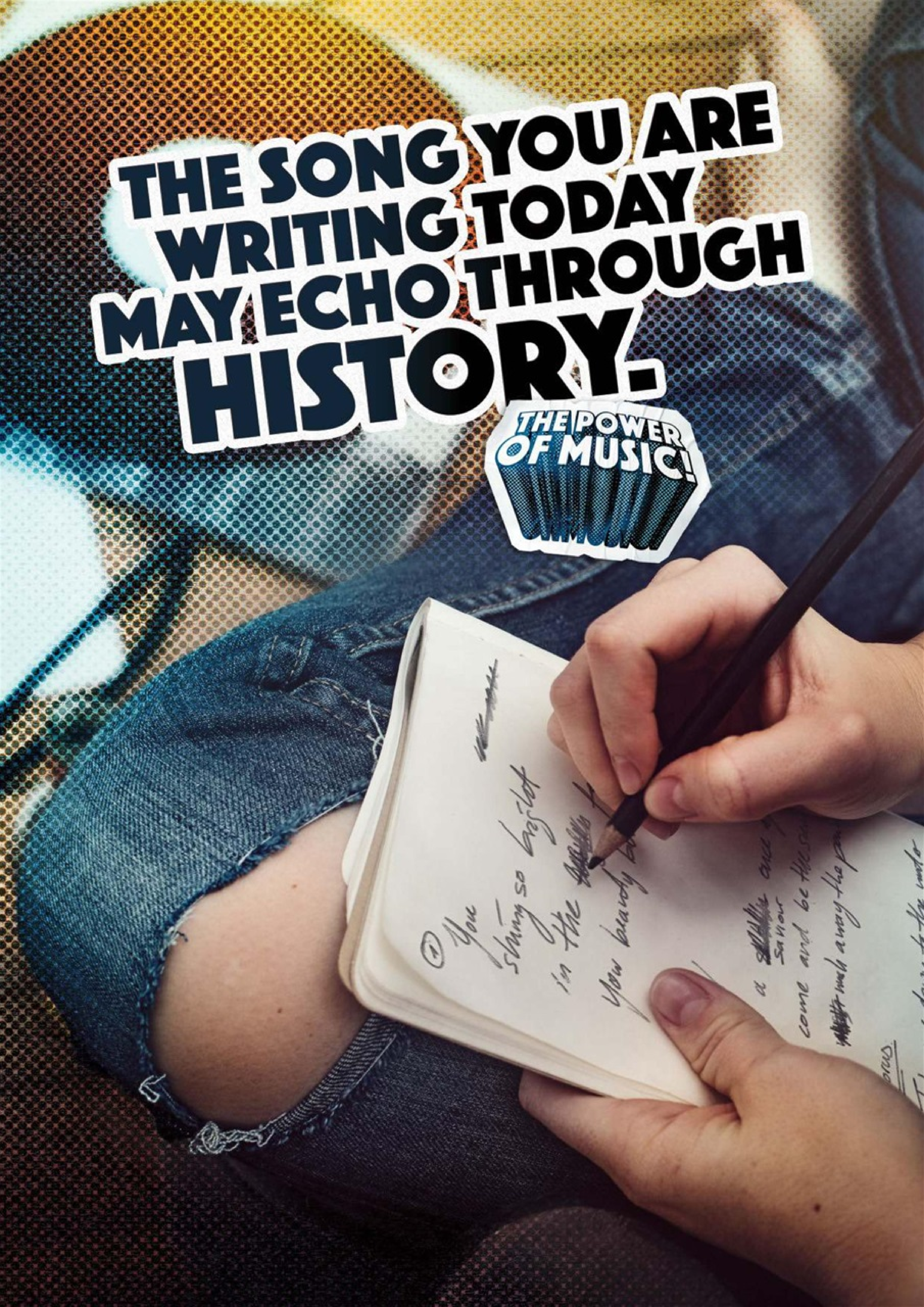
Talk turns to wood and I wondered what the wood selections were like in North Carolina. "Other than some occasional red spruce from North Carolina I don't use any local woods. We have never really been tied to 'traditional' tonewoods and fortunately the market has been generous with that decision. There are a lot of woods that in the past would never make it to a guitar, that are now becoming more standard. Woods like pau ferro or Chechen. So for selecting woods now we try to find sustainable woods and sources. I want great looking wood with good structural character as well as great tone. I buy our wood already processed, meaning it has been cut into sets and almost to the thickness needed for the guitar. I don't do any re-sawing and rather choose to let someone else make a living doing that. The only wood I have had an issue with is padauk; I seem to be allergic as I break out when I use it."

Lichty leaves us with some tips of the trade for any aspiring luthiers. "The biggest tip I can give is to find a way to market your products: that is the missing link with most artist types. If no one knows who you are or what you're building it becomes very challenging to make a living. With regard to the actual luthier part, just keep doing your best and figuring out how to correct your mistakes. Just like learning how to play a guitar does not happen overnight, this craft is a process that takes dedication and hard effort. It can be very rewarding but it will consume you, so marry a rich and understanding partner!" ■

LUTHIERS FOR A CAUSE

One big project Lichty is involved in is the charity Luthiers for a Cause. He tells us a little more about the charity's mission: "For this project, six ukulele builders from around the world are each building a tenor ukulele out of woods from the same two trees. The back and sides are mahogany from the 'Tree' and the tops are from the Lucky Strike redwood tree. The goal is to raise money for a charity. This year it's The Ukulele Kids Club. Along with raising money for this very worthy cause, we are excited to see what each luthier does with the project. By taking the wood variable out of the equation, we will get a deeper respect for what each builder brings to the table. I encourage your readers to check out their website."

Info: www.luthiersforacause.org & https://theukc.org/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THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

For his final 'Fully Functional or Just a Bit of Fun?', luthier Nick Benjamin discusses the scoop cutaway

WORDS: NICK BENJAMIN

Welcome to the final instalment of my series discussing some of the quirkier features that we see popping up on acoustic guitars. Once the preserve of particular small shop builders, some of these features are now approaching the mainstream.

Over the first four months I covered arm-bevels, fanned-frets and side-ports; now let's talk about the feature most associated with me: one I coined the name 'scoop-cutaway' for. They're also known as a 'semi-cutaway', a 'demi-cutaway' among other names. Smaller versions that look more akin to an arm-bevel fall under the name 'bevel-cutaway', 'palm-a-way' and so on.

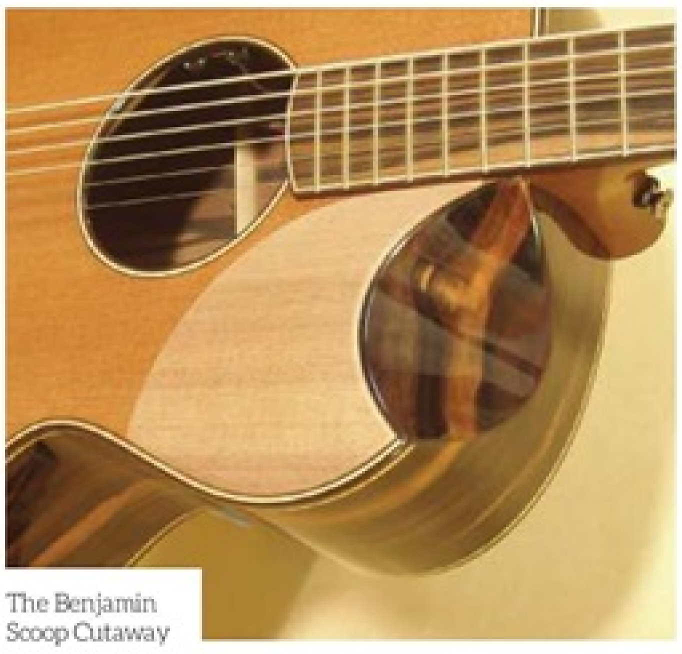
WHAT, HOW, WHY?

Guitar cutaways have been around for a long time and they have generally fallen into two styles in the past, commonly known as 'Venetian' and 'Florentine' due to some (possibly) imagined link to a romantic Italian past. A Venetian cutaway is an extra curve put into a normal guitar side while a Florentine one has a new piece added with an extra joint bringing the shape to a distinct point. The purpose of both designs, of course, is to allow easier access to higher frets. There is much debate as to whether a cutaway is detrimental to the sound of guitars. One thing is certain: a conventional cutaway can modify the way a guitar vibrates. Whether the sound is 'harmed' or just turns out different is a matter of opinion and, as usual, depends a lot on how the guitar is built in other regards.

The main criticism levelled at conventional cutaways is that they reduce the air volume of the guitar body but, in my own experience, more isn't always better when it comes to body volume. I actually prefer my guitars a little shallower for a more focused tone. For me the bigger aspects of change, due to a conventional cutaway, are the way the back of the guitar is made much tighter in the upper-bout area and the way the tight curves of the cutaway may increase the general stiffness in the neck joint area.

Most steel-string guitars are already built pretty solidly in the soundboard area above the soundhole to make sure the fingerboard end is well supported and to stop the neck pulling forward. So any increase in stiffness and strength to an already tight area may very well be a good thing and probably won't have too much tonal impact. Most backs have a relatively unsupported region in the cutaway area and are certainly changed quite a bit in a vibrational sense by a cutaway. These effects can be counteracted

Theo Scharpach's 'Semi-Cutaway': the first!



The Benjamin Scoop Cutaway

by modifications to back bracing and, again, may or may not be a bad thing: just different. You might even find a cutaway can bring some aspects that are desirable in smaller guitars to a bigger model!

CASE STUDY: MACCAFERRI

Many years ago when I had first started making and repairing guitars professionally I had the great privilege to study a genuine 'Maccaferri' guitar. It was the early D-hole model or 'Grande Bouche' with the crazy extra internal sound-box and reflector still intact: just an amazingly complex and fascinating instrument! One of the many idiosyncrasies I noticed was the way the Venetian cutaway twisted around to meet the tapered shape of the heel and this made me suddenly realise that the sides of a guitar did not have to be vertical: you could in fact make them twist and turn.

Impressed as I was by the creative thinking behind this cool cutaway design, my first thought was that it actually removed even more area from the back than normal. I started to wonder if the twist could be in the other direction so that the cutaway actually sat at an angle such that it was deeper at front and took less wood away from the back: following the natural angle that your hand makes when reaching for high notes on a cutaway guitar. The practicalities of bending such a complex 3D curve by hand on a simple bending iron, as I did in those days, seemed pretty daunting, if not impossible and I didn't see how I could do it without some industrial heated press (beyond the means of a solo maker). My usual methods of binding the edges of a guitar wouldn't work when it came to angled sides. I put the idea aside for many years.

ERIC'S LEGACY

In 2006 I decided to embark on construction of a prototype guitar to test out some new ideas I had on a guitar that was not destined for a particular customer. The year before, I had constructed an experimental guitar for Eric Roche, designed to take the percussive techniques he had been developing. Now, though, I wanted to try another path, using a different bracing pattern. Very sadly Eric lost his battle with cancer as I was constructing the new guitar so he was never able to give me his opinion. But it was kindly tested out for me instead by Thomas Leeb, Eric's 'brother-in-strings'.

One idea that wouldn't go away was the idea of an angled cutaway and I decided that this guitar (my 77th or '#77' as Thomas christened it) was the one to try it on. I realised that rather than bend the end of a side into a twisted Venetian shape, a much more viable approach was to make a separate section like a Florentine cutaway and joint this into a the guitar in a similar way but at an angle and I thought using a semi-circular shape would keep it predictable. I thought it might be easier to add it to a finished guitar body with internal modifications and suddenly realised that it didn't need to go as far as the back: in fact the cutaway piece could just go down about two thirds of the way of the side. That way it didn't impact the back at all and there were no issues with binding the back edge.

I finished the body with various extra thicknesses of wood in the region I was going to add the extra curved and angled cutaway piece. I started to sand into the body using a large piece of metal pipe with sandpaper attached. As I gingerly sanded away, an amazing looking shape started to appear as the geometries of the body shape and pipe intersected: a shape I hadn't really imagined (see the pictures) and I knew I was onto something! I didn't bother to bind the top edge on that first one but it looked pretty good without... I've been making them the same ever since!

A few years later, my somewhat self-congratulatory bubble at being so original was burst when I received a polite email informing me that I wasn't the first person to have the idea: master classical guitar maker Theo Scharpach had been building his 'semi-cutaway' for many years on his classical guitars: a slightly smaller take on the idea, but identical in concept! I would like to thank Theo very much for allowing us to use a picture of one of his beautiful guitars for this article. ■

Newton Faulkner's latest guitar about to receive its Scoop!

NICK'S VERDICT

I'm very possibly biased, but deeper versions of the scoop/semi/demi-cutaway, like mine, certainly allow full access to all the higher frets. I can hear no difference in tone between my guitars with or without. Are very shallow versions that allow little, if any, improved access essentially decorative? You'll have to make your own mind up!

RETUNE YOUR EARS

Presenting new, interesting or alternative musicians. Listen to something different, with ***Paul Strange***

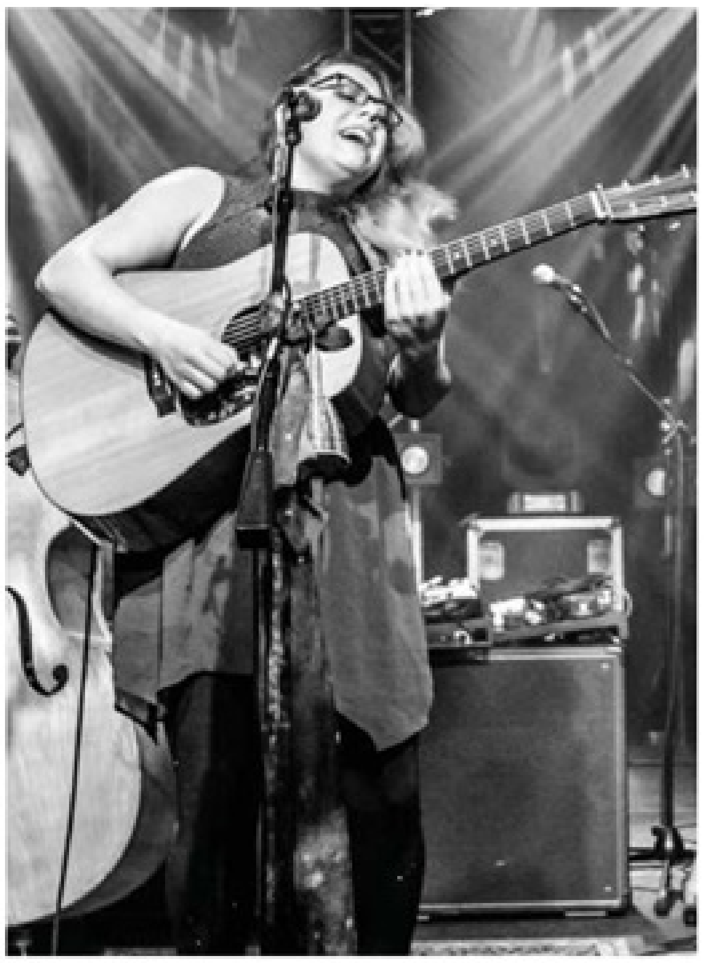
© Read McKendre

BRETT FELDMAN

STYLE… GYPSY JAZZ/WORLD

Based in Rhode Island, I'm a 50-year-old composer-musician. My band, Occidental Gypsy, comprises Eli Bishop (violin), Jeremy Frantz (vocals and guitar), Jon Chapman (percussion), Jeff Feldman (bass) and myself (guitar). We perform acoustic original gypsy jazz with Latin and classical accents. We've played throughout the US, and Europe, with plans for a UK tour for summer 2018. Our album *44070*, which came out this year, is a recognition of historical individuals and events that have changed our way of life. The title track is about Rudolf Vrba – prisoner 44070 – who was a Hungarian inmate at Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Second World War. After escaping, he reported the atrocities that occurred there, and prevented the deportation of Hungarian Jews, saving as many as 200,000 lives. 'Children's March' is about the campaign for desegregated schools in the Southern US. My favourite track is 'Messalina' about a dog I had for 18 years. My guitar is an antique model provided by luthier Leo Eimers who has sponsored the band. It's a perfect Selmer-type replica, with authentic sound and resonance. Essentially it's identical to Django Reinhardt's guitar. You can really dig in with it, and it sounds very sweet when played softly. Also the action is amazing. I use a 2.0 thick pick, and either mic it or play it through a Roland acoustic amp. I'm self-taught, and practise for two to five hours a day. My advice to anyone starting out is to practice slow and don't be too hard on yourself. Have confidence – you sound better than you think – and always use a metronome. The most important things I've learnt? That there's always someone better.

Info: www.occidentalgypsy.com



MELODY WALKER

STYLE… ROOTS POP

I'm the frontwoman of the band Front Country. I spent the first 31 years of my life in Northern California and moved to Nashville last year. The band comprises Adam Roszkiewicz (mandolin), Jeremy Darrow (bass) Jacob Groopman (lead guitar and Spanish-style dobro) and Leif Karlstrom (five-string violin) and myself (guitar, banjo). We started out playing bluegrass in 2011, then the following year we won band contests at Telluride and RockyGrass festival, Colorado. That kicked off our career as professionals, and we've been touring full-time ever since. What inspired our name? I like to say it's because we play country music but we're from the city. Front country, as opposed to back country. We've just released our second album, *Other Love Songs*. I'd sent the band 20 or 30 songs to choose from and they happened to pick all the ones about feelings and relationships. Once the record came together, we realised we had a running theme. The first track, 'If Something Breaks', is my favourite, since it has a dual meaning for me as a touring musician. I play a Martin D-18 SS dreadnought acoustic guitar with a K&K Pure Mini pickup. I like it because it's half an inch shorter in scale than a normal D-18, so it fits me a little better, and the lower tension on the strings makes for a slightly warmer tone. I always use a Wegen flatpick. I've used a basic LR Baggs Venue DI for years, and it's great as an all-in-one pedal with a tuner, mute and boost, and some EQ ability. I also play a little open-back banjo in our sets, as well as the caxixis – a shaker from Brazil via Ghana. Future plans? We're thinking about material for our next record and hope to play some UK festivals next summer.

Info: www.frontcountryband.com

© Redwood Photography

SAM KELLY

STYLE… FOLK

I'm a 25-year-old singer, producer, and multi-instrumentalist living in Bristol and performing with The Lost Boys. The band comprises myself (guitar, bouzouki, mandolin, vocals), Jamie Francis (banjo), Evan Carson (drums), Ciaran Algar (fiddle), Graham Coe (cello), Toby Shaer (whistles, flutes, cittern, pipes, fiddle), and Archie Churchill-Moss (melodeon). *Pretty Peggy* is our second album, and the first time the whole band has had creative input in the recording process. It's a wild mix of English, Irish, Scottish and American traditional songs, alongside contemporary original songs and covers. My favourite track is 'The Shining Ship': it really sums up the recording process – everyone added their little ingredients. I have two guitars at the moment. My main guitar recently has been my Martin OMC Cherry, from their sustainable wood range, with a Fishman Ellipse Aura pickup. My other one is a baritone guitar, handmade for me by luthier Alan Miller. I almost always use a pick, as most of the stuff I do is rhythm guitar, and I almost never use standard tuning: I go between DADGAD, CGCGCD, and CGDGDD. We've never had an electric bass in the band, so I've always used a Boss OC-3 Super Octave on my Martin. The baritone is down in open Bb and has a rich bottom end, so before we had our own engineer I used to run it through an EQ pedal to brighten the top a little bit and avoid muddiness. I also have a Fylde Archtop bouzouki and a Fylde Touchstone mandolin, both handmade by Roger Bucknall. Our album launch tour starts on 27 November in Devon, and finishes at Greystones, Sheffield, on 7 December.

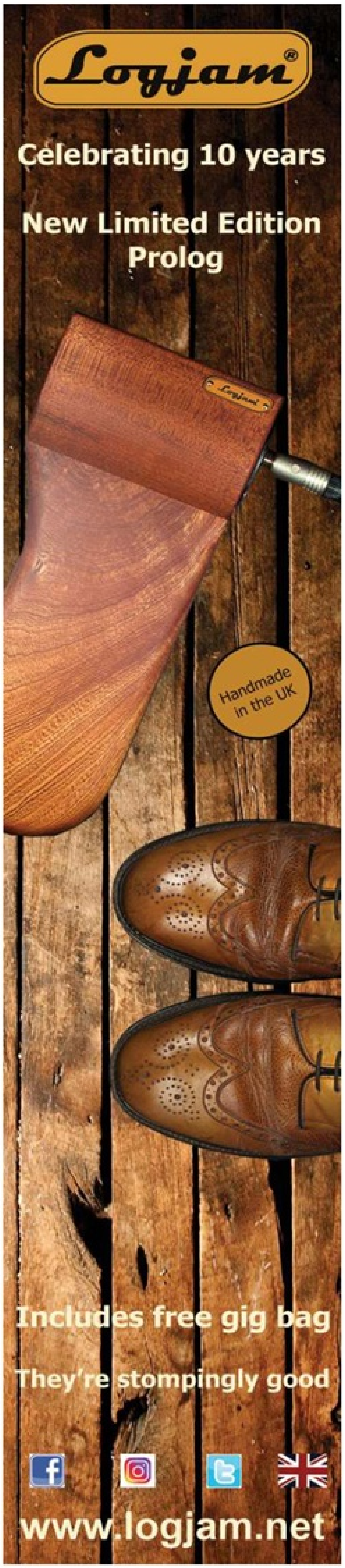
Info: www.samkelly.org

CAOLAIDHE DAVIS

STYLE… AMERICANA

I'm a 36-year-old musician and singer-songwriter, living in Rockville, Maryland. In 2008 I co-founded The 19th Street Band with my future wife Meghan (fiddle, mandolin, vocals), Patty Dougherty (drums, vocal harmony), Greg Hardin (bass, vocal harmony) and myself (guitar, harmonica, vocals). Our new album, *The Things That Matter*, was released earlier this year. The theme is apparent in the title. Do what you love, choose to live life to its fullest, take risks and concentrate on the important things. My favourite track is 'It's True What They Say' because it reminds me of the music I used to listen to as a teenager in Belfast. The title track is about what matters most in life, your loved ones. It came out of me very naturally one night, all at once. I always compose on acoustic guitar. My main instrument is a Taylor 816ce semi-acoustic cutaway with a spruce top and rosewood body. It sounds good, feels good, and plays good. I use this guitar for 230 shows a year and it's reliable and durable. It's my workhorse and I love the tone. I use an LR Baggs iBeam pickup and run it through two LR Baggs DIs – the Acoustic Session and the Venue. No amp, straight into the board. And I use an Electro-Harmonix Soul Food FX pedal for any songs that lend themselves to a little distortion/electric guitar sound. When playing in alternate tunings (DADGAD and DADF#AD) and using a slide, I play a Guild DCE-5. I also have a backup Taylor 414. I use a pick most of the time, but play fingerstyle when the song needs it. I'm currently writing for a new album and planning a tour of the UK and Ireland for summer 2018, with dates to include the Open House Festival in Bangor.

Info: www.19thstreetband.com

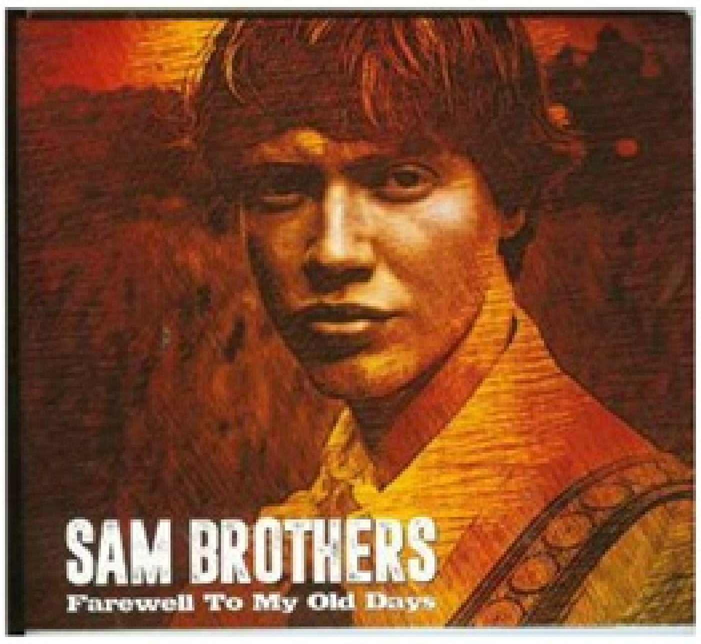


RAY WYLIE HUBBARD

TELL THE DEVIL I'M GETTING THERE FAST AS I CAN ★★★☆☆

WWW.RAYWYLIE.COM

Listening to this Texas singer is like finding yourself alone in the desert, with nothing but coyotes for company. Raw dust-drenched music that weaves a crazed path between JJ Cale and the blues of Mance Lipscomb, Ray growls with the passion of a clapboard chapel Pentecostal preacher. What the heck he's on about is anyone's guess, but with a thumping bass drum and some sneaky slide guitar, it's a glorious visceral romp. Elsewhere Lucinda Williams adds her haunting harmonies to the lurching title track, Ray namechecking his 'sunburst Gibson and an old country band', before getting almost smoochy with Patty Griffin on 'In Times Of Cold'. Fine stuff. **JP**



SAM BROTHERS

FAREWELL TO MY OLD DAYS ★★★★☆

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/SAMBROTHERSMUSIC

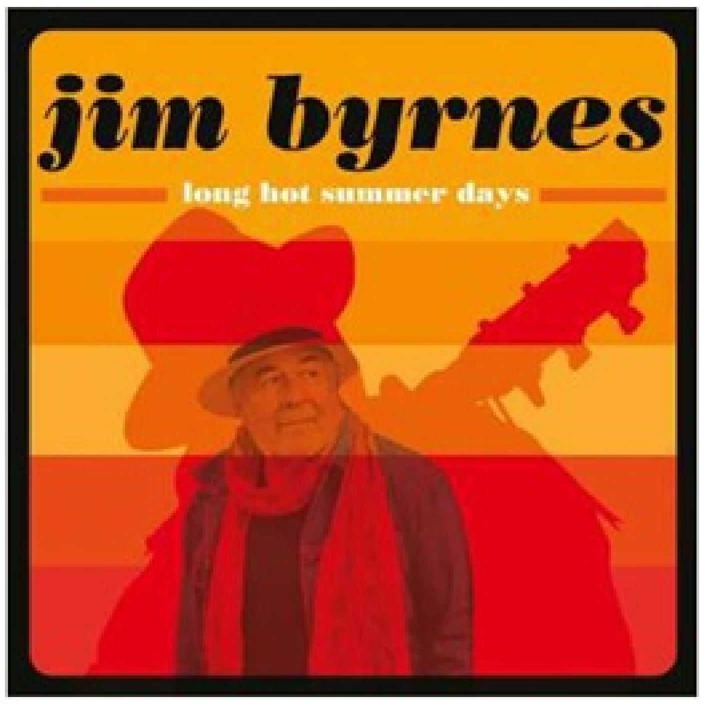
Apparently after cutting this album, Sam Brothers couldn't get a break from record companies. Which is sad, because, unless you have deaf ears, it's quickly apparent that the ten self penned songs written by this 23-year-old Canterbury singer, are rather special. Sure there's nothing particularly new, the wheezing harmonica on 'The Messenger' and his bluesy 'Someone Like You' borrowing heavily from Dylan's back pages. But there any comparison ends. Recorded in glorious analogue without overdubs, Sam's fingerpicking on the haunting 'From The Sky' is stunning, and his vocals throughout are never overblown but always compelling, a real treat. Watch this space. **JP**

REBECCA PRONSKY

WITNESS – HILLARY'S SONG CYCLE ★★★☆☆

WWW.WITNESSHILLARYPROJECT.COM

Hunter S Thompson said, "When the going gets weird, the weird get going", and exhuming the demise of Hillary Clinton's political ambitions, Rebecca Pronsky has certainly got stuck in. Just where she stands is unclear, but the results are hugely entertaining. From the gentle folky 'Walk In The Woods', to the bitter cynicism of 'Why Do I Try', Pronsky asking "Why does the sight of a woman's face inspire such hate?", she's nailed Hillary's journey. It's not all bad news either. The light skippy beat of 'Forgotten' imagines the lady donning a T-shirt and revelling in her newfound freedom. A lot of fun. **JP**



JIM BYRNES

LONG HOT SUMMER DAYS ★★★☆☆

WWW.BLACKHENMUSIC.COM/ALBUM-LONG-HOT-SUMMER

As usual with albums he's produced, it's worth the price of admission alone to hear Steve Dawson's peerless slide guitar. But leaving Steve's sprinkles of fairy dust aside, it's clear that Jim Byrnes, a 69-year-old singer and guitarist from St Louis, has the kind of rhumboogie he's dishing up here, flowing in his veins. From the laidback growl and easy rolling beat of 'Anywhere The Wind Blows', to the sleazy New Orleans slouch of 'There's Something On Your Mind', the stripped-down spooky vibe of Willie Dixon's 'Weak Brain, Narrow Mind', there are no prizes for guessing these guys had a ball. **JP**

RICHARD THOMPSON BAND

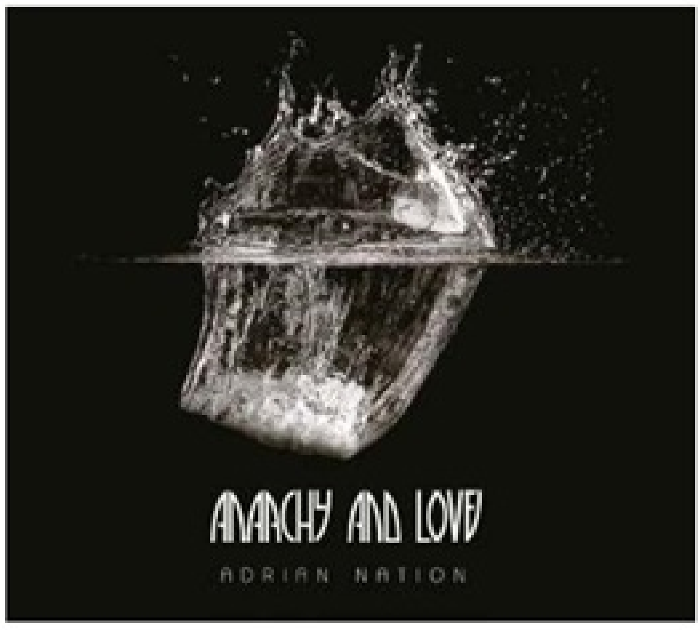
LIVE AT ROCKPALAST ★★★★☆

WWW.RICHARDTHOMPSON-MUSIC.COM

During the 80s, the German Rockpalast shows, a set of TV specials in which entire concerts were screened live, were the stuff of legend.

The roster of acts who took part is mind-boggling, and this three-CD and two-DVD set from 1983 and 1984, with the Richard Thompson band in full flight, is a real treat. Crawling from the wreckage of his marriage, there's an icy edge to his desolate epics 'Tear Stained Letter' and 'Hand Of Kindness', songs that transcend any categorisation.

But all the Thompson classics are here, and just to prove it's not all doom and gloom, the band finish by tearing up the floorboards with 'High School Hop' and 'Great Balls Of Fire'. **JP**



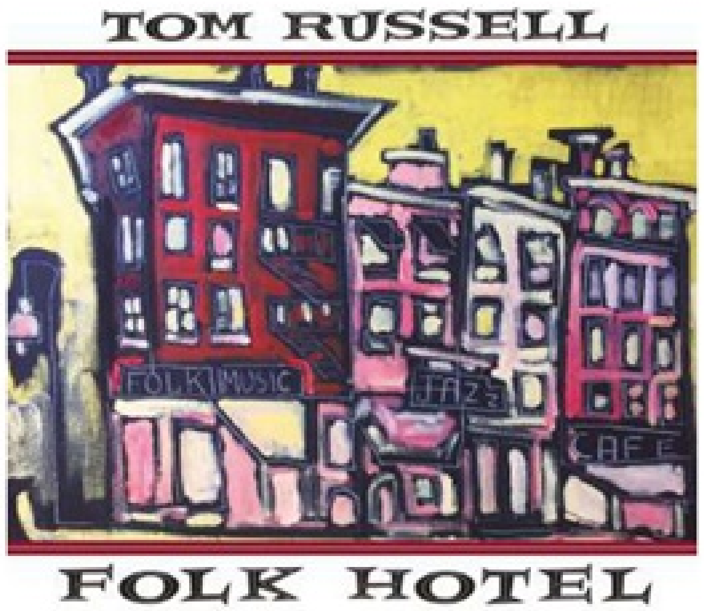
ADRIAN NATION

ANARCHY AND LOVE ★★☆☆☆

WWW.ADRIANNATION.COM

The fourth album from Adrian Nation finds him adapting his fluid acoustic technique to electric guitar, something which, on this showing, has allowed him the best of both worlds. Looped echoes swirl in the background of his hazy take of Runrig's 'Rocket To The Moon', but on the eerie 'Benderloch Stone', Adrian's concise folk-orientated playing transcends any electric muse.

A gentle album with a pervading Celtic feel to many of the tracks, there's an unexpected John Fahey feel to his 12-string instrumental 'Carpe Meridianus'. Adrian's vocals are often semi whispered, and maybe he could do with working a bit of a sweat up here and there. **JP**

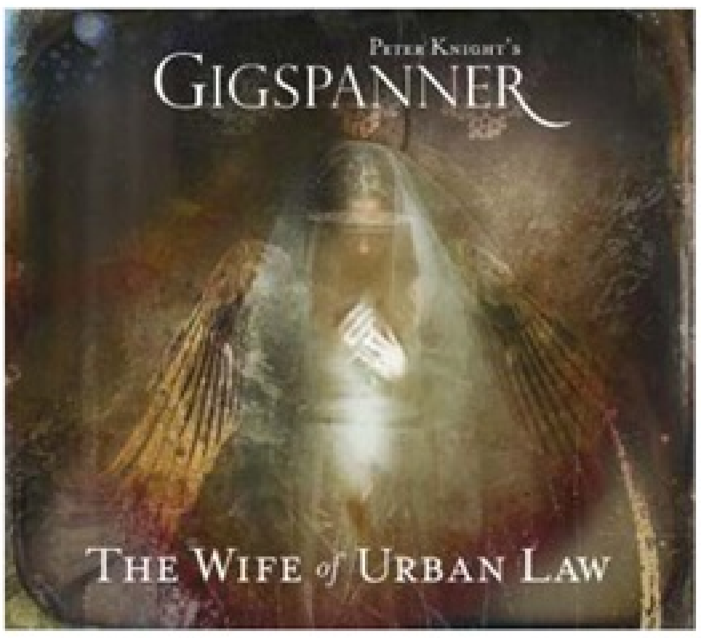


TOM RUSSELL

FOLK HOTEL ★★★★☆

WWW.TOMRUSSELL.COM

Tom Russell's quite a guy, his recorded output is prodigious, (28 albums since 1976), and over the decades this painter, writer and musician has evolved into an unofficial curator of alternative American culture, and just about anything else that takes his fancy. This time around Tom's journey begins with a celebration of New York's infamous Chelsea Hotel, 'Up In The Old Hotel', before moving on to the backstreets of Cardiff for a eulogy to Dylan Thomas, and 'The Last Time I Saw Hank', with references to Hank Williams and George Jones. There's almost too much to take in, the songs delivered in Tom's tremulous voice, and a sincerity that's almost painful. But like most of what he turns his hand to, it's quite a gem. **JP**



GIGSPANNER

THE WIFE OF URBAN LAW ★★★☆☆

WWW.GIGSPANNER.COM

For a trio principally employing fiddle, guitar and percussion, Gigspanner have long had a knack of creating innovative music that puts them ahead of their field. At the heart of the band is the playing of Peter Knight, a fiddler who eschews strenuous workouts in favour of empathetic call and response licks with guitarist Roger Flack. An album of ever-changing musical landscapes, there's almost a jazz feel to their instrumental 'The Blackbird', with 'Urban's Reel' a glorious cinematic piece beginning with Flack's bluesy electric guitar, pulling out sparse notes over an ambient drone, before the reel finally rollicks into life. The result is mysterious and totally entertaining. **JP**

LAURA CORTESE & THE DANCE CARDS

CALIFORNIA CALLING ★★★★★

WWW.THISISLAURACORTESE.COM

An album that almost defies analysis, the incredible music this bunch make will grab you from the get-go. There's an ethereal beauty to songs like 'Hold On', guaranteed to send shivers down your spine, the beauty of the harmonies that Laura and her three Dance Cards concoct, their vocals rising and falling to an almost new age backdrop of fluttering cello and fiddle, laced with occasional washes of synth. The result is often stunning, every track taking a new turn that'd do Kate Bush proud. If there was any justice, you'd see Laura on Jools next week. **JP**

MICHAEL CHAPMAN & EHUD BANAI

EB = MC2 ★★★★☆

WWW.MICHAELCHAPMAN.CO.UK

Chapman's recent renaissance has been a thing of wonder, bringing valediction to his faithful fan base, and converting a new generation to the savage grace of his music. Now following recent collaborations with Steve Gunn and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, Yorkshire's unstoppable bard has linked up with Israeli folk singer-guitarist Ehud Banai. Chapman lays down those unmistakable descending chord structures, singing in his husky, gravel-soaked voice, as Banai adds ambient noises, looped guitar and eerie vocals in his native tongue. The music's hugely organic, hugely enjoyable and wonderful. **JP**

AJ CROCE

JUST LIKE MEDICINE ★★★☆☆

WWW.AJCROCEMUSIC.COM

The son of the late, respected singer Jim Croce, for his ninth album, AJ's assembled a dream team that includes Vince Gill, Steve Cropper and the Muscle Shoals Horns. With Dan Penn in the producer's chair, a man who worked with Elvis and just about every Division 1 singer to ever set foot in a Memphis studio, there was never any doubt that this would be a classy release.

Obviously intriguing is his recording of 'Name Of The Game', an unreleased song by his father on which Colin Linden plays Jim's acoustic guitar. Elsewhere there's a swampy soul feel to the tracks, AJ's songs working well with this stellar studio gang; no mean achievement. **JP**

DAVE STEWART

NASHVILLE SESSIONS ★★☆☆☆

WWW.DAVESTEWARTENT.COM

Sometimes you wonder how Mr Eurythmics does it, one moment strumming guitar on back porches with gnarly Mississippi bluesmen, the next hanging out with Mick Jagger, then penning movie soundtracks. The man seems unstoppable. So when in 2011 he hunkered down in Nashville to produce three country albums, it was an almost inevitable career move. So it's no surprise to hear him now, mooching and smooching along with the crème de la crème, Alison Krauss, Stevie Nicks, Joss Stone and eight other ladies he's lured into the studio. Impeccably produced with that syrupy Nashville sheen, Dave's vocals hold up well, and the gals sing their hearts out, but it's so lightweight it hurts. An insomniac's dream. **JP**

THE STRANGE BLUE DREAMS

THE STRANGE BLUE DREAMS ★★★☆☆

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/THESTRANGEBLUEDREAMS

It's great to read that this Glasgow outfit are regularly out there working, because their music is indefinable, an original mix of the unoriginal, and definitely not what you'd hear down at the Dog And Donkey.

Clanging surf guitars introduce 'Reverberatin' Love', a song that rolls slickly along with the band's ghostly harmonies behind Dave Addison's 'oh so clean vocals', before stuff like 'Twilight Zone', a tongue-in-cheek romp worthy of a 50s beach party movie soundtrack. Then there's the dreamy 'Lyrebird', the scuffling 'Ballad Of The Sun And Moon' awash with harmonies and whistling. Sizzling wackiness of the highest order. **JP**

PHILIP MARINO

DAYS LIKE THESE ★★★☆☆

WWW.PHILIPMARINO.COM

The first release by this Essex-based American singer-songwriter finds him plumbing some heavyweight demons. There's the lament of lost love on 'Everybody Knows', 'Grenade' finds him admitting he's 'Never At Home In [His] Skin', and in 'The Long Road', the wish that when the time comes 'You'd Better Hope It Comes Fast'. So, a bit of a downer, then? Well not exactly. Philip comes over like a supercharged Springsteen, strong earthy vocals set against producer Simone Felice's intuitive stripped back arrangements, with a searingly passionate approach to his austere soul searching songs. Honest music for dishonest times. **JP**

CARA DILLON

WANDERER ★★★★☆

WWW.CARADILLON.CO.UK

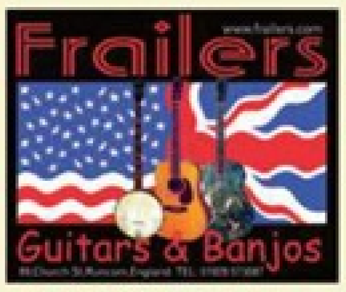
A doe-eyed Cara Dillon stares wistfully out of her window, a fitting cover for an album that finds the émigré Irish songstress delving into songs of emigration and movement of people. Produced by husband Seth Lakeman, his sparse piano-based arrangements of classic folk songs like 'Black Waterside' and 'Both Sides Of The Tweed', allow Cara's crystal clear vocals to hold centre stage. Orcadian singer Kris Drever joins her for the sorrow-drenched 'Sailor Boy', Justin Adams adding electric guitar to her self-penned 'The Leaving Song'. On one hand it's all a bit maudlin, but the beauty of the music readily transcends any such doubts. **JP**

LEVI CUSS

JUST BELOW RADIO(VOLS 1 & 2) ★★★☆☆

WWW.LEVICUSS.COM

Well it makes a change from hearing about Route 66. Canadian singer Levi Cuss toured the UK last year and it obviously made an impression, hence he wrote 'Shoreditch High', a rocking ode to the city and his love affair with the people, trains and local pubs. This is Levi's second batch of recordings, and there's an eccentric edge to his approach that compels you to listen. One moment he's like Neil Young, blasts of deliciously grungy guitar on songs like 'Blew It All Away', the next ranting about 'Prairie Fire Haze' over the weird stop time 'Junction 21', and shouting a scary anthem for internet daters on 'One Night Stand'. But I'd guess he's a man not easily wounded. **JP**



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GORDON GILTRAP INSTRUMENTAL ARTIST

FULL TAB ONLINE

'PEDROLINO'

Gordon talks 'creative flow' – illustrated by this jazzy piece

This month's piece comes from an early GG album entitled *Under this Blue Sky*, on the boxset *A Time To Reflect*. The recorded version features excellent flute playing by Robin Ashe Roy and the title comes from Italian opera. 'Pedrolino' is a comic servant.

Just a brief word about composition here for all you tune writers: I recently gave a seminar for RGT (Registry of Guitar Tutors) in London at their annual conference, and was sharing my thoughts with them about how I compose. When do some of the most unusual and unexpected ideas emerge? Usually late at night when I'm tired, when the ego drops away and nothing is standing in the way of the creative flow.

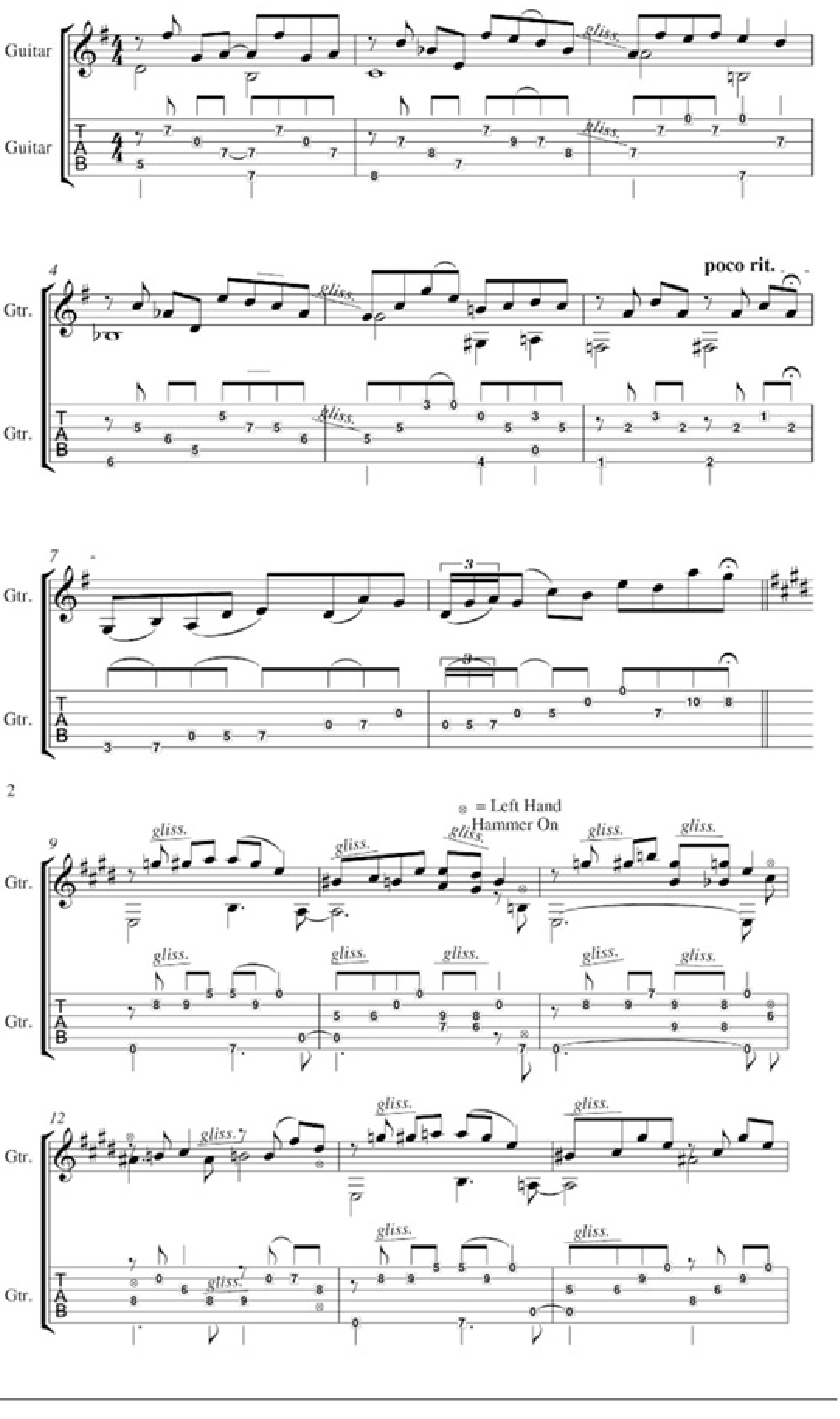
'Pedrolino' is one such example when the main idea just appeared at my fingertips and virtually wrote itself. This doesn't happen very often, and when it does it is truly a gift and one to be cherished.

The piece is fairly unusual for me as it has a certain 'jazz tinge' to it, unlike my usual classical/Celtic approach. What is also unusual is that it is in standard tuning!

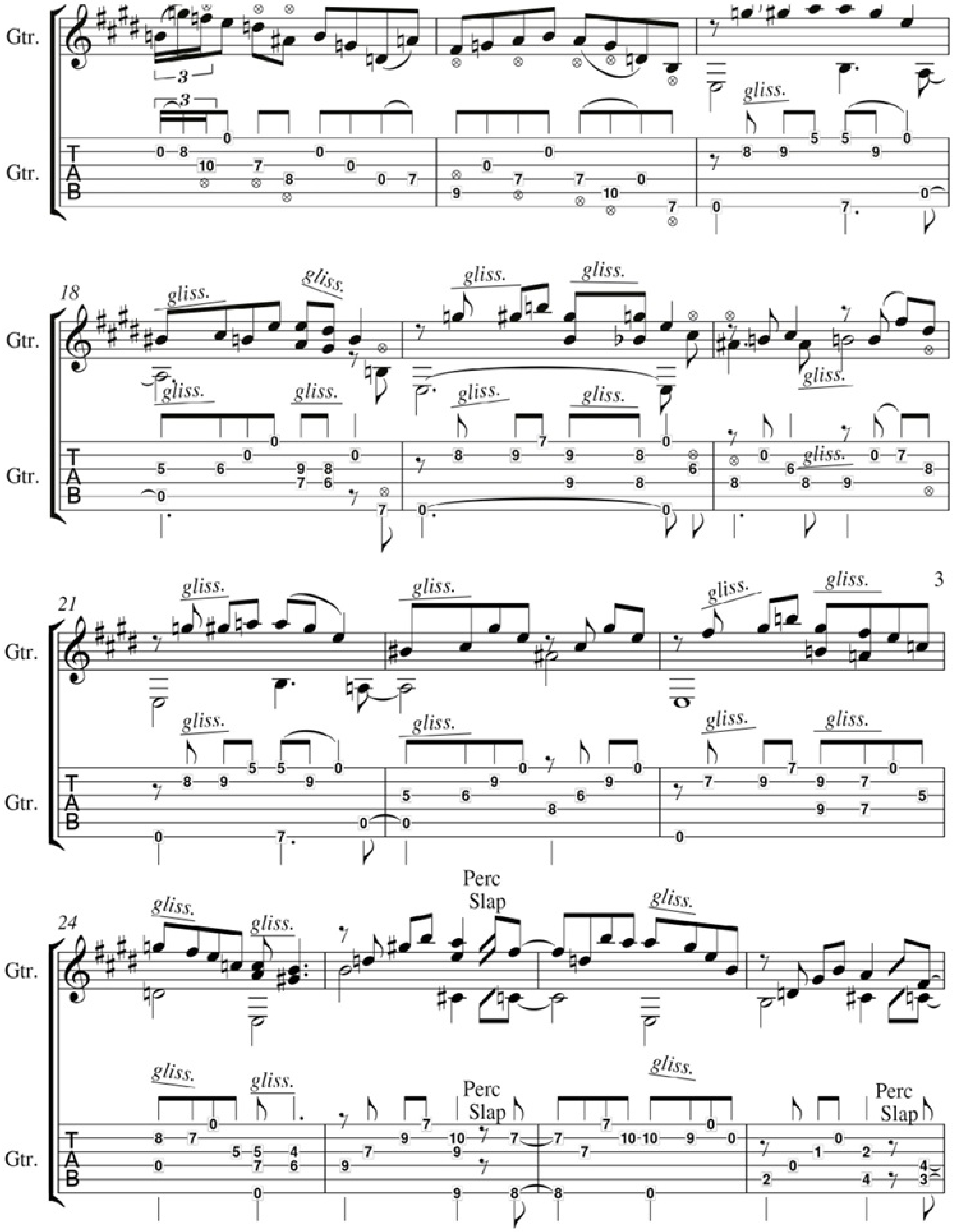
Throughout the piece we have my usual left hand legato approach with, out of nowhere, hammer-ons marked with a cross within a circle. Also there are many passages featuring slide (gliss) sections, adding to the overall flow of the piece. As per usual, I want to keep complex notes down to a minimum which otherwise can blur much of what is intended, and much of the fingering is fairly straightforward, albeit challenging in places. Many of the phrases are repeated through the piece with slight variations at the end of sections.

The opening eight bars can be seen as a nice, gentle prelude to the main body of the piece with some fairly long stretchy hammer-ons in bars 7 and 8. Watch out for the triplet hammers at the start of bar 8! Let's class bars 9 to 16 as the verse. This section in bar 9 is the one that appeared late at night when I was truly ready for bed! Once again we have a long stretch particularly with fret 7 on string 6 and fret 5 on string 1 and fret 9 on string 2, followed by the pull-off to open on string 1. Straightaway this looks puzzling in print, but works perfectly well. That same pattern appears in bars 17, 21, 33, 37, 49, 53, 69, 73 and 77.

'PEDROLINO'



'PEDROLINO' (CONTINUED)



In bar 25 and 26, we have a riff that is repeated an octave lower in the following bars, and you will notice that there are 'perc slaps' marked at bars 25, 27 and 29 to give the whole thing a bit more of a rhythmic drive to push those sections forward. I use the back of my right hand fingers to just gently tap down on the strings. The right hand is in that position already so it's not a problem.

As with all new pieces, do take things slowly, and if you aren't that familiar with these extensive hammer-on techniques, just concentrate on those sections, which alone are good exercises for the fingers. Just take bars 7 and 8 as a good start point and you will find within a short space of time that things will start to slot into place. ■

With thanks to Chris Dummigan for his transcription.

CHRIS GIBBONS COMPOSER

BEGINNER'S COUNTRY BLUES

Gibbons gives us a crash course in country blues accompaniments

This article is designed for those players who have been playing for a while but need a process to improve their picking style. The genre for these exercises is country blues, but can easily be applied to most other styles.

Many guitar accompaniments using a fingerpicking style rather than strumming involve learning a 'picking scheme' that is applied to the underlying chord; thumb 1 2 3, thumb 1 2 3 and so on. In country blues, we often want to play two parts, the bass note and the treble melody. Trying to incorporate the two lines simultaneously can seem quite a challenge. The way I have broken the process down is thus:

EXAMPLE 1

☐ First learn the melody line, the equivalent of the right-hand piano part if you were playing a keyboard.

☐ For the time being, ignore the long bass notes starting on the open low E string.

☐ The rhythm is in a 'swing' tempo. Think of the nursery rhyme 'Pop Goes the Weasel': "Half a pound of tu-penn-y rice". "Half a pound of" are eighth notes and "tupenny" is the triplet, three notes with a bracketed [3] above. Tap out the rhythm first to familiarise yourself with the feel.

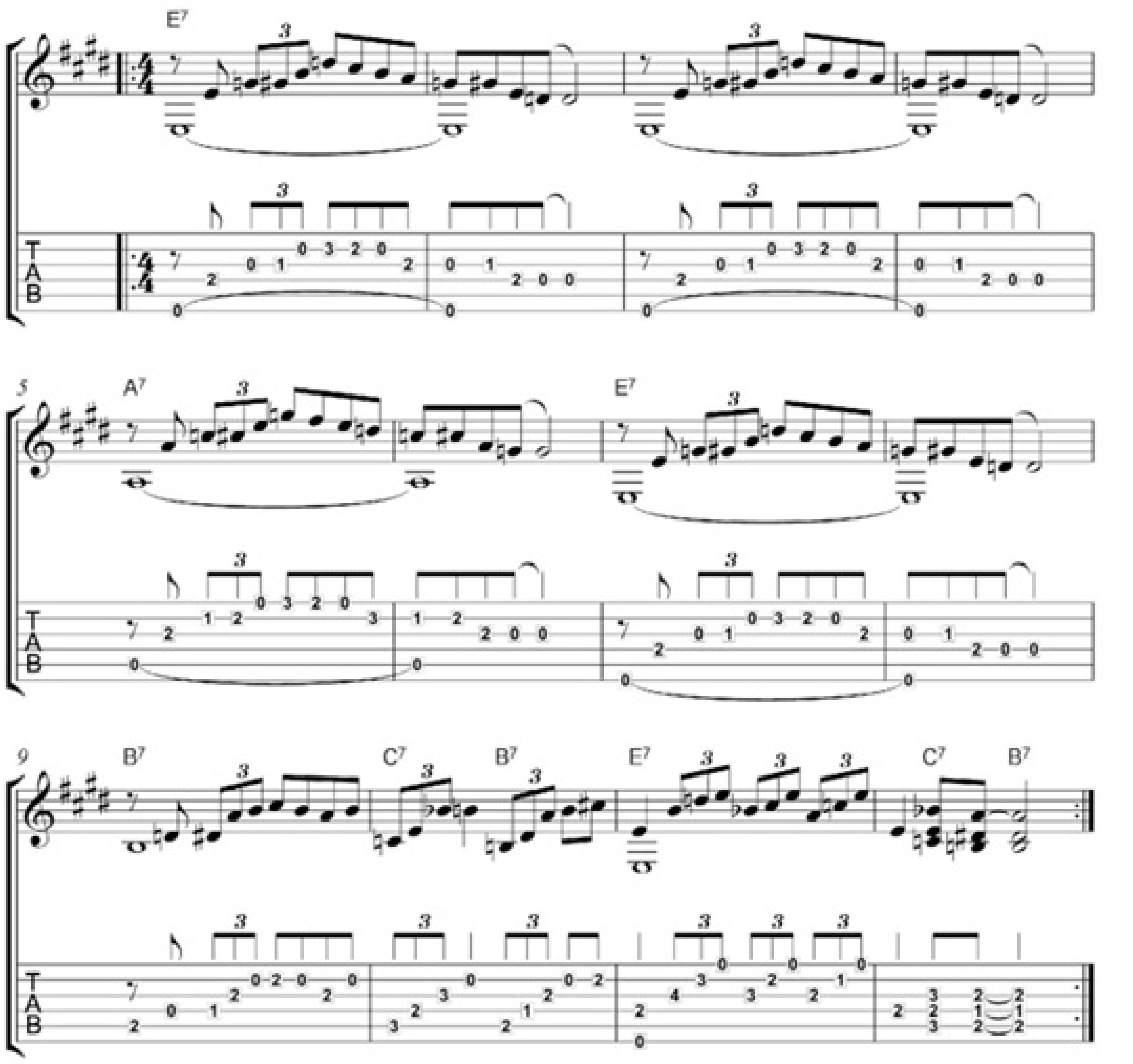
☐ Now learn the melody, playing very slowly, preferably to a metronome; you can find one on the excellent 'Tuna' app for guitar.

☐ Next with your right-hand thumb you can add the long bass notes at the start of each phrase. You'll note that the phrase on the E7 chord is identical when it moves to the A7 chord, but it is 'transposed'; that is, the relationship between the notes within the phrase is identical but the start point changes to fit the underlying chord.

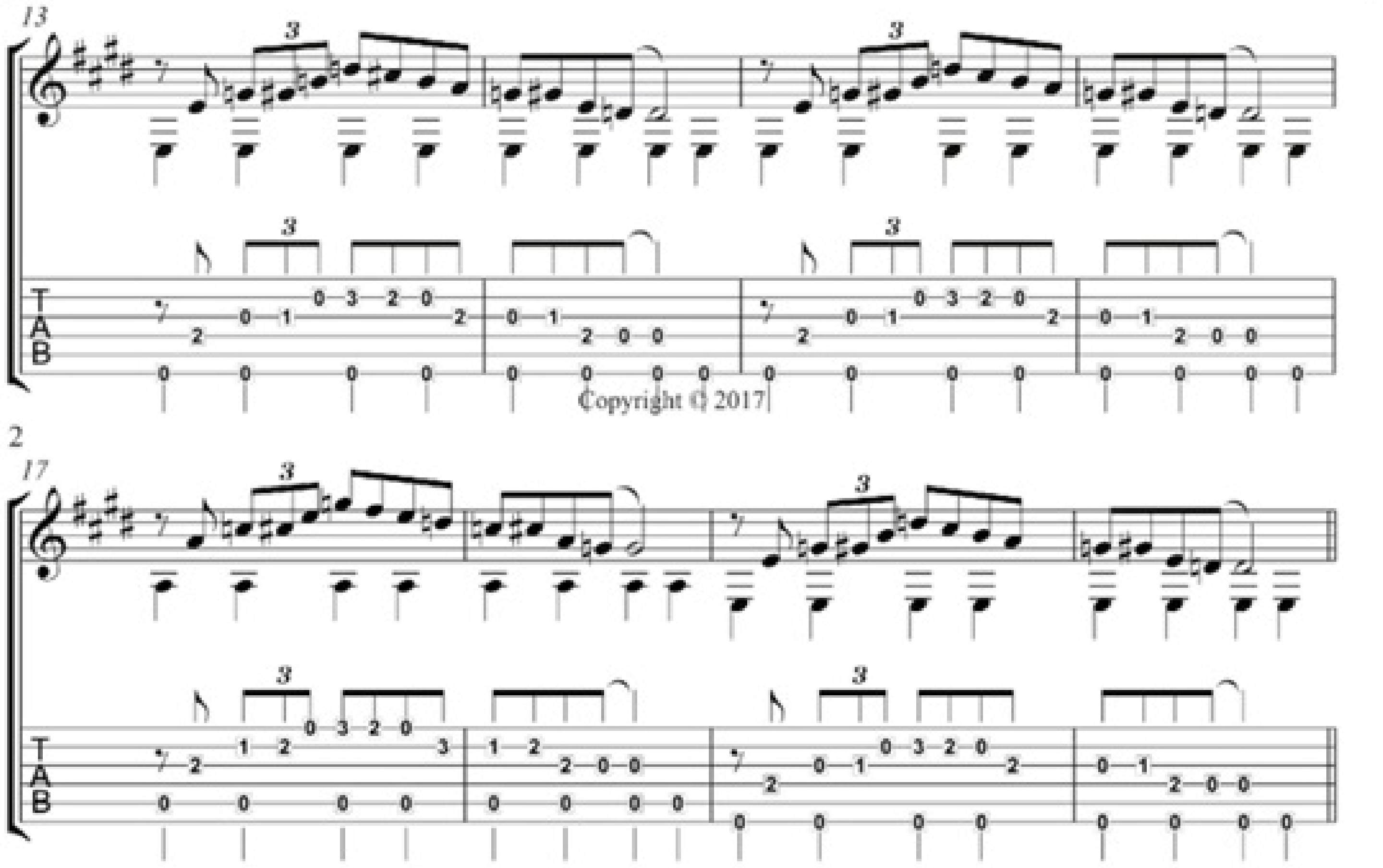
EXAMPLE 2

Now, rather than playing a long held bass note, we are going to play four bass notes to a bar; you can see on the tab how a certain bass note is aligned with a melody note above, thus you can practice keeping the melody and bass synchronised by making

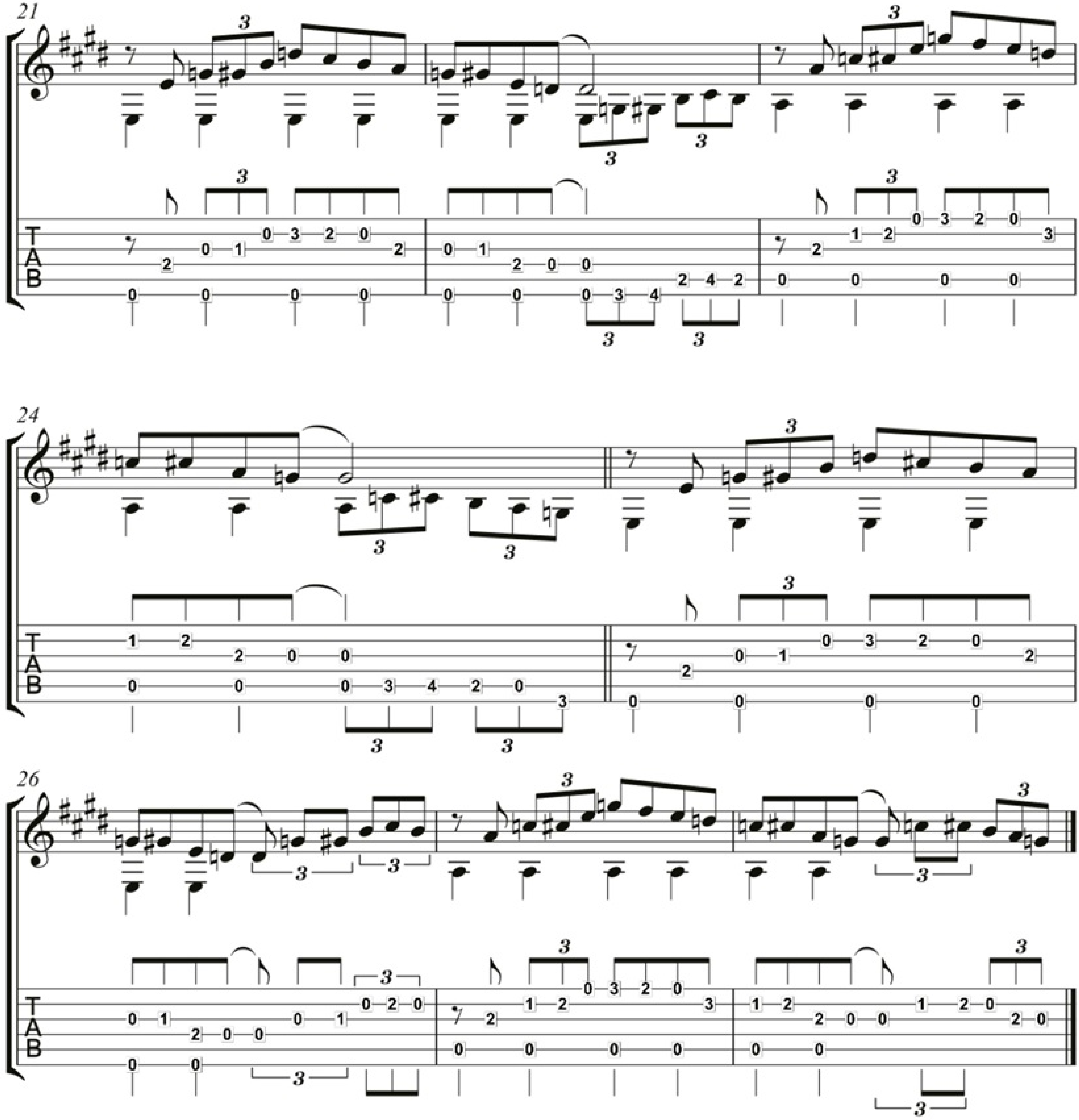
EXAMPLE 1



EXAMPLE 2



EXAMPLES 3 & 4



sure you pluck the bass and melody note that are aligned at exactly the same time.

EXAMPLES 3 & 4

Here we can embellish the composition further by adding a 'fill' on the bass strings at the end of every second bar. In this way we can devise a phrase or series of notes that connect one chord to the next.

You can apply this technique to all of your songs in whatever style; connecting phrases add interest and flow to your performance, even on a very simple and basic level, rather than just strumming chords from beginning to end. Make sure you've really nailed **Example 2** first, because you need to maintain a steady tempo throughout the connecting line.

Finally, we can use the space at the end of the bar to add a melodic fill rather than a bass fill. The same principles apply as above. Notice also that I've just used the first two-chord sections, E7 and A7 to illustrate this, but of course you can explore and invent your own lines to join chords throughout the piece, and I would encourage you to do so.

IN CONCLUSION

- ☐ Understand the rhythm, tap it out before you learn the melody.
- ☐ Learn the melody *slowly*!
- ☐ Add the long bass notes.
- ☐ Add the 4 to a bar bass.
- ☐ Learn the bass fill.
- ☐ Learn the treble fill.

That's it! Now I know you'll enjoy this so please adopt this layer-by-layer approach to your studies. You'll soon make great progress. ■

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'HOW CAN I SAY?'

Carl continues his exploration of his Eagles-inspired piece, this time highlighting the 'storytelling' soloing approach

FULL TAB ONLINE

In this month's column I'll be continuing to look at my tune 'How Can I Say?', specifically at the solo I played on my 2013 recording of the tune featured on my album *Forbearance*.

The mood of the song is wistful and romantic at an easy 118 BPM pace, with Eagles-style strummed acoustic rhythm guitars lending it a "wind in your hair" airiness. Although, nowadays, I regret to say it's more like "wind on my [bald] head".

The acoustic guitar solo, beginning at 1:56, is played on my Martin 00-28EC Eric Clapton signature model guitar. I don't own a lot of guitars, but I choose them very carefully and this Martin is the finest-sounding acoustic guitar I've ever played. Every note and chord just shimmers with a kind of warm, magical glow.

> **"The start and end of a solo are the most important"**

There are many ways of approaching a guitar solo, and while I love them all, I have a genuine affection for the melodic 'storytelling' approach. This approach puts the song (or tune) first, rather than just using the song as a vehicle for 'guitar stuff', and the solo serves to enhance the composition.

As I mentioned in my previous column, famous examples of this approach are George Harrison's solo on The Beatles 'Something' and Louis Shelton's solo on Lionel Richie's 'Hello'. Other highly regarded exponents of this 'less is more' approach, which focuses on weaving spontaneous melodies rather than 'hot licks', are JJ Cale, Mark Knopfler, Pat Metheny, John Abercrombie and Jim Hall.

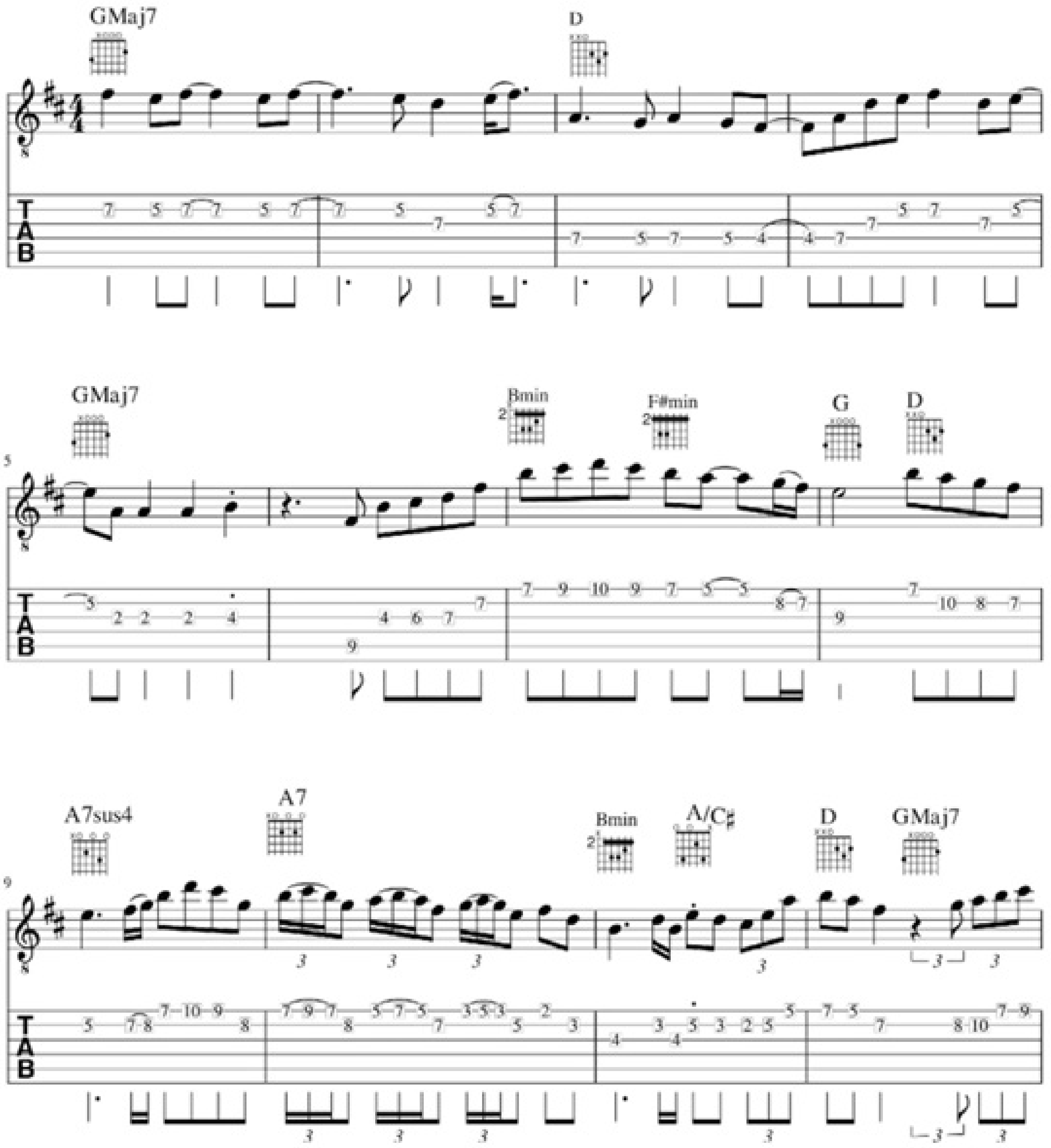
PERFORMANCE NOTES

The whole tune is in the key of D major and every note I play is within the key, with no chromatics at all. The solo should be played legato throughout, except for the notated staccato notes in bars 5 and 11. By legato I mean the original sense of the word, 'smoothly and well-connected', not the guitar-centric usage indicating a technique that uses lots of hammer-ons and a minimal amount of picking.

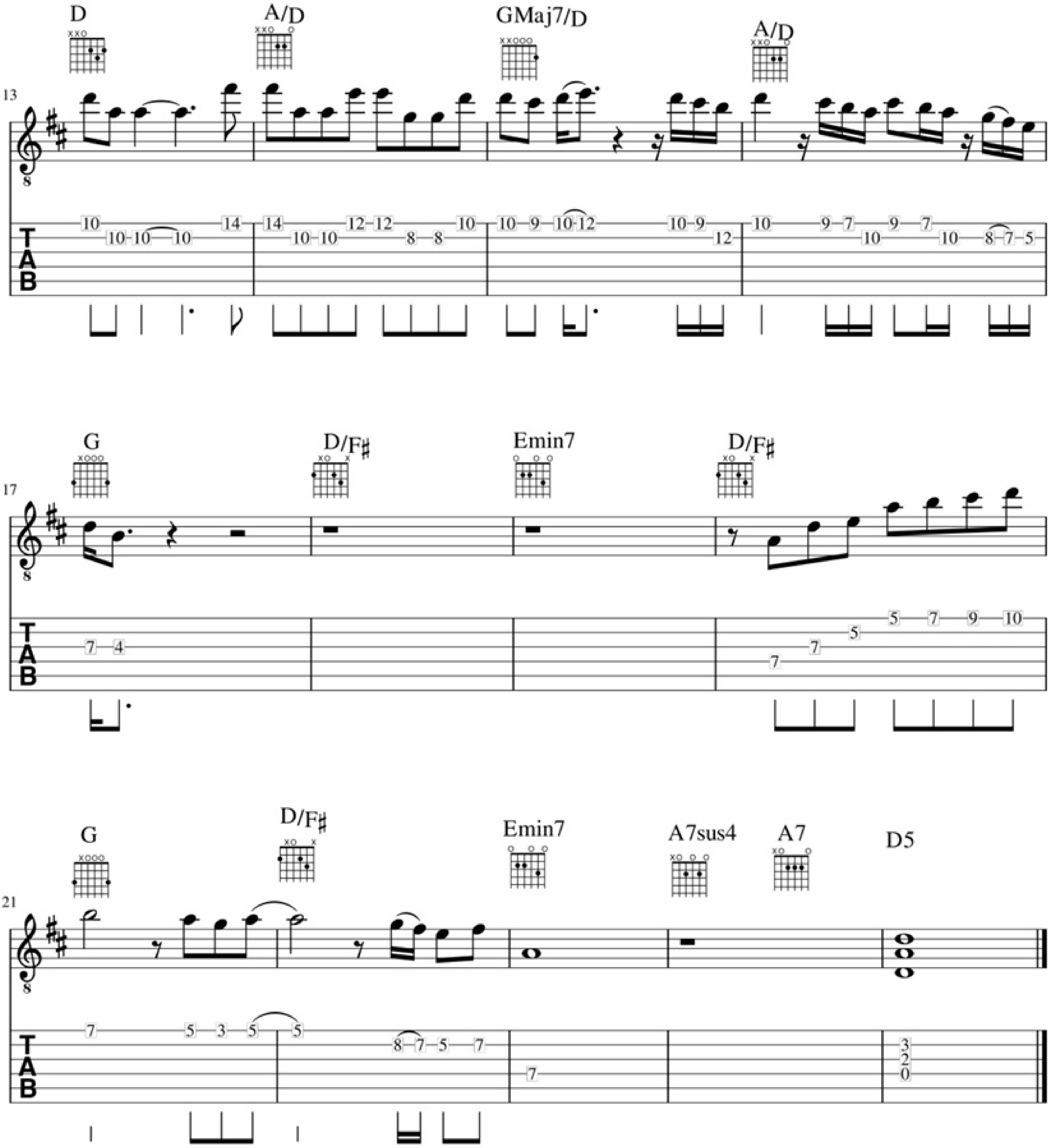
I always remember reading an interview with Jeff Beck when I was a teenager in which he stated that the start and end of a solo are the most important parts. Keeping that in mind, I commenced the solo with a simple and clear five-bar melodic statement (bars 1 to 5). I then continue in that patient, simple style until bar 10 in which I unleash some tricky-sounding, but simple-to-play, semiquaver triplets.

I then resume the melodic approach until bar 14 in which I make use of a couple of major sixths, large expansive intervals which have the effect of 'opening up' the melodic contour of the solo. This is followed

'HOW CAN I SAY?'



'HOW CAN I SAY?' (CONTINUED)



by some skipping descending semiquavers in bars 15 and 16. You may find you want to slur some of these semiquavers rather than picking them all.

To finish off, again keeping Jeff Beck's words of wisdom in mind, I play a very clear and definite melodic phrase in bars 20 to 24 and then a little three-note D5 chord which rounds the solo out in a natural way.

POINTS OF INTEREST

As the song has a very simple D major tonality throughout, I naturally found myself staying within the key without using any chromatic jazz phrases at all. As the note choices were limited I created variation by the use of different rhythms; while the 'default' rhythm of this solo is a combination of crotchets, quavers and dotted crotchets (this is established in the first five bar phrase), I make use of semiquavers in bars 7, 15, 16 and 22, semiquaver triplets in bar 10 and quaver triplets in bar 11. Once you have mastered this solo, which shouldn't take too long, record yourself playing the chords and improvise your own solos. I hope you have enjoyed this brief insight into my approach to improvisation. ■

RICHARD GILEWITZ FINGERSTYLE GUITARIST

METRO-GROAN 2-1-3

Hate using your metronome? Gilewitz shows us how to love it – and improve fast

If I were going to give this article a stated level, it might say: for every level imperative, essential and extraordinarily beneficial. What I discuss below can be applied to many instruments, but for now let's refer to the guitar.

Before I dig into the very basics of music theory, some fingerpicking patterns, a unique and fun way to explore rhythms, and specifically singer-songwriters and ukulele players, I'm going to talk about the effective use of a metronome. Rarely have I encountered a student who does not fear the metronome, the tool I lovingly refer to as the 'metro-groan'. When left to his or her own devices during a lesson, if given the opportunity, most will abandon the metronome, throwing it under the lounge chair or tossing it into the back of the closet. Even when I show them how to use it and wait for the moment they set the tempo, it's always the same thing: a full minute of silence searching for the missing metronome, followed by a frustrated sigh, a nervous giggle or snarl with a request to switch to something else. Anything else.

I believe I have devised a way to make it more fun and inspire students to actually try the metronome on their own not only during the lesson, but after the sessions. How do I know this? They tell me they did. In fact, they are the ones who bring it up at the next lesson or on a return visit to a music camp. They also actually show me proudly what they have accomplished.

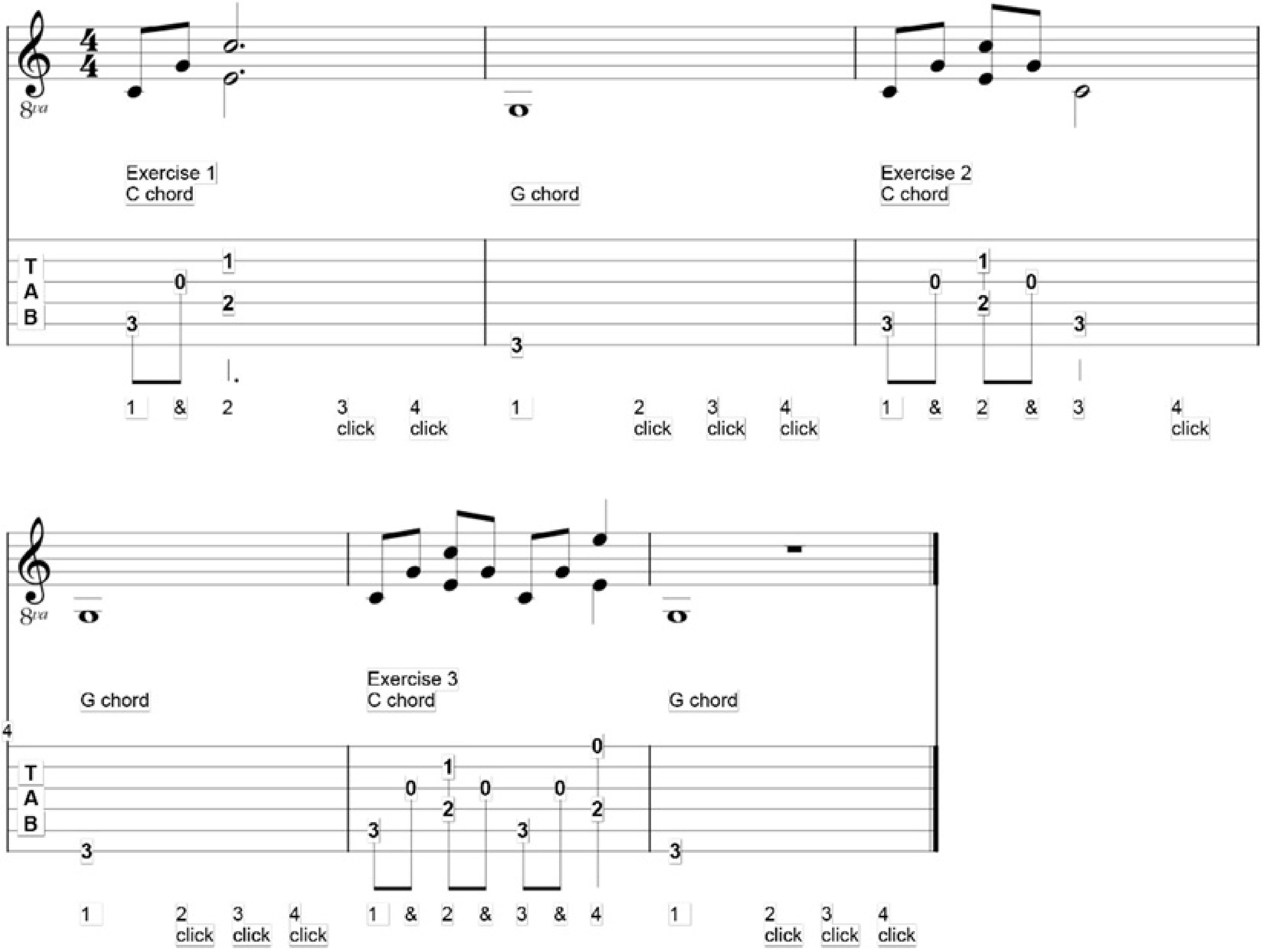
I call my method the 'Metronome 2 – 1 – 3'. The idea is to start to either strum or fingerpick for only two beats, being sure not to play anything on beat 3 and 4. That's when the metronome click occurs. Then this is cycled. For example, when strumming, the player would simply strum 1 & 2 or down up down, to be followed by the metronome clicking on beats 3 and 4. This effort is then cycled. If fingerpicking, it would simply be pluck, pluck, pluck on beats 1 & 2. Any pattern will do as long as it is kept as simple as possible. The two follow-up clicks on beat 3 and 4 refer to the click 2 in the title.

For the next exercise, the click of 1 in the title is used by simply adding a beat to your play. Once again be sure to *not* play on the & of beat 3. You would now play as a strummer, 1 & 2 & 3 followed by 1 click on the metronome where beat 4 would fall. Then cycle back around with repeats. The strum would just be down up down up down with the single click on beat 4. The 3 click can be the most unnerving for players because of their difficulty to embrace nothingness for three full beats. There always seems to be a sense of very slight urgency over the short time of the 3 clicks where they want to cycle back in a bit sooner than they should.

"A friend once told me, 'If you have rhythm they love you. If you don't, they hate you'"

For this '3' in the title, the player's job is to play as a strummer or picker on beats 1 & 2 & 3 & 4, plus a single strike or pluck on beat 1 of the following measure which could either be the same chord or a different chord.

METRO-GROAN 2-1-3



Be sure you do not strum or pluck on the & of beat 4 or the & of beat 1 of this follow-up measure. Once the follow-up measure appears and you play on beat 1, there would be 3 clicks on beats 2, 3, and 4 before the cycle back comes in. Watch for coming in too early. If you do and it's even a micro-bit too soon, the off timing beats will add up and before you know it you'll fall into a groove of your own, losing sight and sound of the click and abandon the metronome. At this point you might think this is painfully basic and pointless, but try it, just to brag that you did it – I dare you!

Here are some other considerations during this process. Don't fingerpick or play a chord. Simply rest the fingers of your fretting hand flat and loose over the strings to create a snare effect and focus totally on strumming the 2-1-3 concept with the metronome in this cyclical fashion. If you do use a chord, place a capo at frets 4 or 5, so that you don't wear out your fretting fingers. You will not have to press as hard on the chords and therefore be available for more iterations without succumbing to hand cramps.

Here's a few other suggestions. Focus on your posture while playing, then your breathing, then play with your eyes closed, but try to see your hands with the 'mind's eye', then attempt to locate various points of stress in your body and release them one at a time. Perhaps your shoulders are tight, or you're clenching your teeth and jaw, furrowing your eyebrows, tensing your butt cheeks, pressing one foot hard against the floor, or curling your toes into a fist. The idea is to move your mind to these different efforts one at a time. Stay with one effort for a minute, then move on to the next point of focus.

Let's go back to the metronome for a minute. Pay attention to where you have set the click tempo. Somewhere in the range of 72 to 80 BPM (beats per minute) is good. Something slow like this might be a good simple groove as a start point. Once you feel that you have established success at this speed, after just a few minutes bump it up or down to different speeds. Test yourself to find your range. You'll recognize where you begin to lose it. Often playing very slowly can prove to be more challenging than you might think. Now, what if you were in the middle of a performance and either desired or needed to suddenly switch from an up-tempo tune at 144 BPM to a ballad at 69 BPM? Could you do it? Could you make that transition immediately and effectively for the duration? This is the training ground for precisely those situations.

If you don't have a metronome handy, use a drum machine or something else that might go click in the night! And of course try to work with other people. Playing with humans is essential if you're attempting to ground your timing. I realise that this might seem like the most boring and pointless thing to do when you pick up your instrument. But trust me in knowing that timing is the root of it all. A highly-respected musician friend of mine once simply said, "If you have rhythm they love you. If you don't, they hate you!" I don't know if I'd go that far, but I can tell you for sure that I have felt it during performance when I know I'm on a steady groove track. I feel the whole room responding with a pulse. As another friend of mine once said, "That's when the room is in concert. The audience and performer both stand witness to the music in the room and almost become observers. It is the player's job to not interfere with hiccups of any kind. This is when learning to love the metronome pays off. ■

SIMON MAYOR UK MANDOLIN MAESTRO

'LEATHER BRITCHES'

Simon Mayor considers how to bring an old time tune to life on the mandolin

A banjo-playing friend was celebrating a significant birthday last summer and hired a hall for a memorable knees-up. There were quite a few musicians I hadn't seen for a long time, and of course we all had a jam – playing both sorts of music! No, not country and western (I know, it's an old joke!) but its more rootsy cousins bluegrass and old time.

I've always enjoyed the etiquette of a bluegrass session. Each player, on a nod from the leader, has the chance to try out some improvisation over 32 bars of whatever's being played. Most of the tunes have just three or four chords and it's usually fairly easy to hear the sequence and rattle off a few of your hottest licks. And nobody really minds a few bum notes – fortunately for me!

Old time usually follows a different path; there's no improvisation beyond a few rhythmic shuffles and bits of decoration. Everyone's playing together and it's heads down for a good 15 minutes until we're all intoxicated by the simplicity and catchiness of the melody.

I love both, and will be talking a little about how to approach bluegrass improvisation at some future date. For now, here's 'Leather Britches', one of the old time tunes we played.

As the day wore on and I listened to each musician, it struck me that all of us present had absorbed the style by osmosis, either by playing along to records or by joining in such sessions. None of us was from Kentucky or Tennessee, but it all sounded as authentic as a bunch of Britons could hope for.

The nuances of a particular style are something that notation has always struggled to convey. Even classical music has an element of 'listen and copy' to it, something that can't be communicated from the printed page alone. With other musical forms it's even harder, which is why if most classical musicians are presented with the sheet music of a traditional tune they'll make it sound too straight, too alien to the idiom. If you want to hear what I mean, try playing 'Leather Britches' ignoring all the articulation I've written in, or indeed which may come instinctively to you. Don't use any hammer-ons, pull-offs or turns. Importantly, make sure you play every note with a plectrum stroke. For this, you'll need to follow the blue line of plectrum direction markings (the upside down tumbler is a down stroke, the 'V' is an upstroke). I'll guarantee the result will be fairly uninteresting.

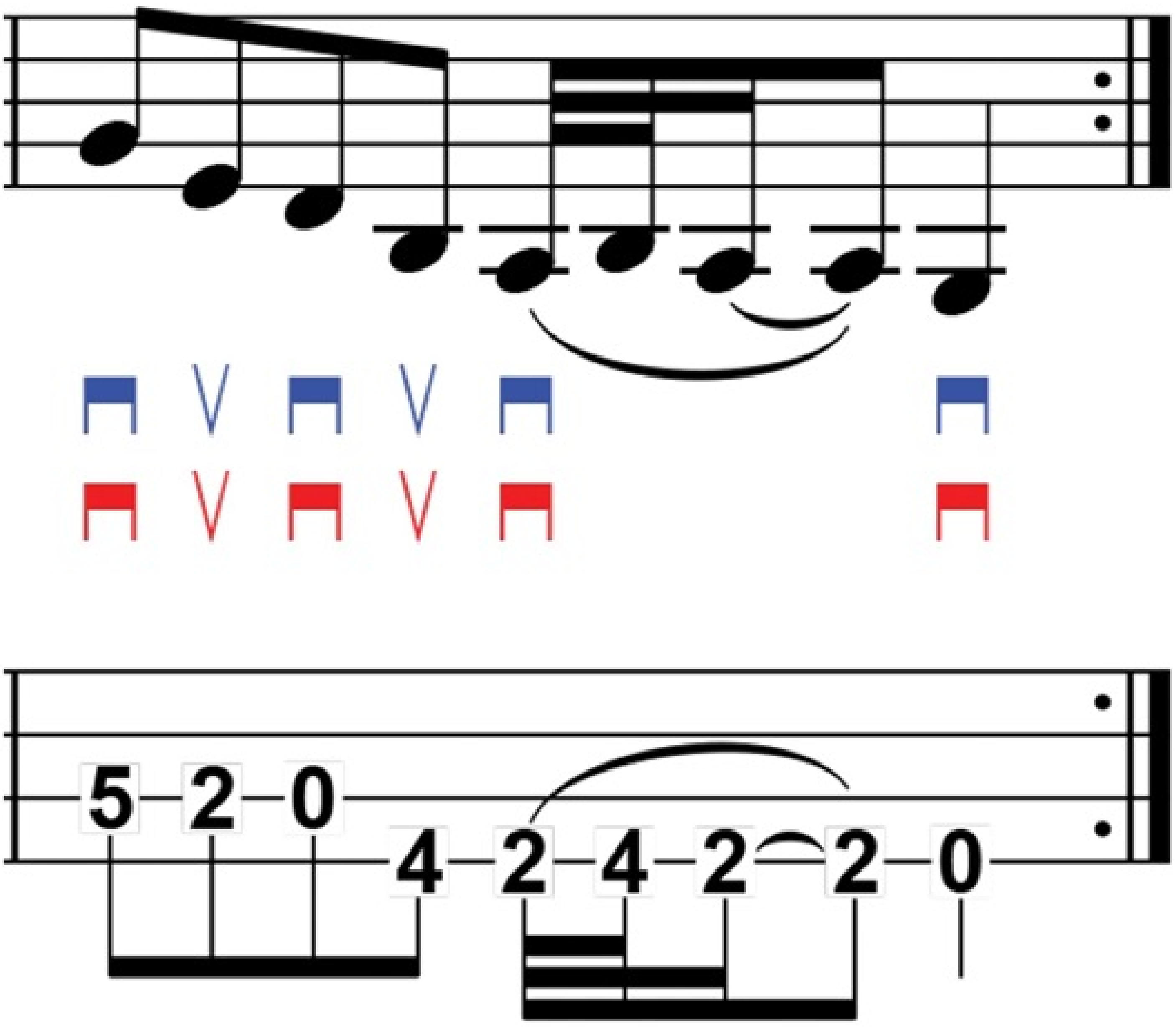
Next, try to play it within the idiom by incorporating all the marked articulation. If you've grown up playing any sort of traditional music this will probably be instinctive, but if not, use my suggestions as written. This time, you'll need to follow the second, red line of plectrum direction marks. It's fundamentally the same as the blue line, but certain hammered or pulled notes are sounded only by the left hand and by relying on the residual energy in the string from the preceding, plucked note.

A hammered note is quite self-explanatory. Take bar 1 as an example; play the open D and then for the second note hammer the third finger down onto the G. There is no plectrum stroke for the G; it is sounded by the sheer force of the third finger coming down while the string is still vibrating. Ideally, it should be just as loud as the D, but I'll settle for 99 percent. Because the G now lacks the initial attack of the plectrum, its timbre is more rounded and contrasts with its predecessor.

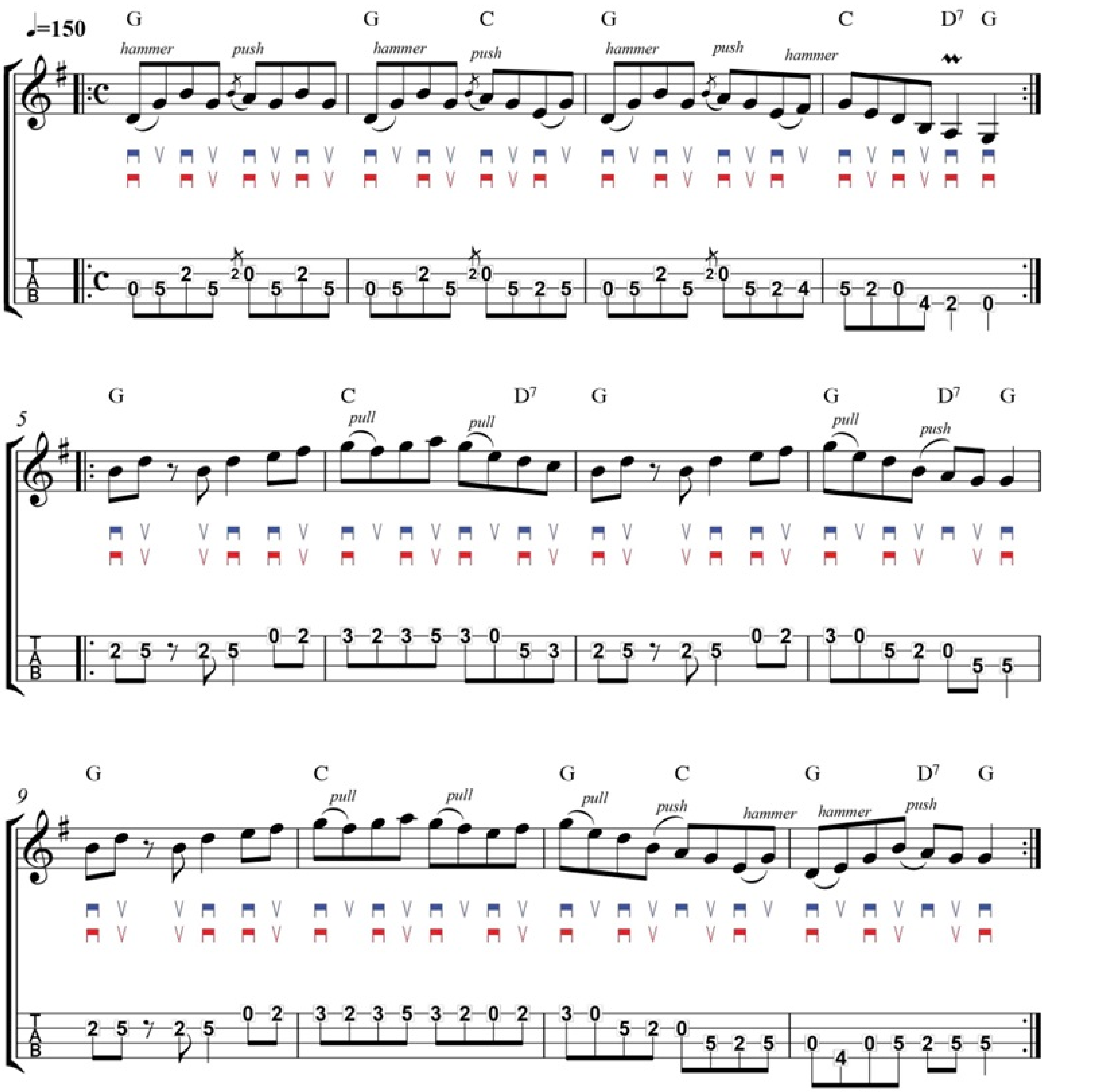
The next two notes are plucked as normal, then we have a push-off from the grace note of B to the A on the open string. This works in a similar, but reverse manner; play the B, then flick the finger off the string causing a little pluck to make the open A sound. You can flick up (a push) or down (a pull), whichever is most natural to you; I use both techniques depending on the context, but the effect is the same. Carry on to the end of the tune in a similar manner.

The turn (mordent) marked by a little zigzag above the low A in bar 4 is a bit of musical shorthand. Play the A and then execute a

EXAMPLE 1



'LEATHER BRITCHES'



lightening fast hammer onto the note above, B, and release equally quickly. This is a very common form of decoration in all forms of traditional music. If we were to notate it, it might look like **Example 1**.

Once you manage to use decoration fluently and instinctively, you can compare the two styles, and, incidentally, treat my markings as suggestions rather than anything cast in stone. To use an analogy of speech, the blue line (devoid of decoration) sounds like someone repeating the same syllable over and over, albeit at different pitches. The red line, with the decoration added, sounds like many different syllables and a more varied intonation. It's more like words, like meaningful speech.

'Leather Britches' threw up another point of interest in mandolin playing, and that is the sometimes thorny issue of plectrum direction. The vast majority of players find it natural to keep downstrokes on emphasised beats. In this tune there are four beats to the bar, but a typical bar has notes on the half beats as well as the main beats (count 1 - & - 2 - & - 3 - & - 4 - & -), and the first three bars follow this pattern exactly. Now look at bar 4. Rather than use an upstroke on the final G (after a downstroke on the preceding A), it's best to use another downstroke because the G is one of the four main, emphasised beats. When we follow the red line, and a note is hammered, for example the second note in bar 1, we pick up again on the B with downstrokes because, once again, the B is a main beat of the bar.

Bars 5, 7 and 9 get even more interesting because the tune itself contains a little syncopated figure. The third quaver is a rest. If a note had been here, it would have been the second beat of the bar and so a downstroke, but because it's missing, we pick up again on the B with another upstroke. Our downstrokes act as a subliminal metronome!

Our jam continued almost to cocoa time. How metronomic we all were by then, I'm really not sure! ■

MIKE DAWES FINGERSTYLE VIRTUOSO

FULL TAB ONLINE

'THE OLD ROOM – PART 3'

Dawes brings us an Antipodean-themed lesson as he finishes up his exploration of 'The Old Room', inspired by Australia's Karnivool

Hello again everyone, greetings from New Zealand. In this issue we'll conclude one of the new tunes from 'ERA', my second album, released last month. For those of you just joining us, I highly recommend checking out my previous two columns to get to grips with the majority of the piece, as well as the exotic open Bm9 tuning that we are using here (B, F#, C#, D, A, D – low to high).

As before, this piece has a lot of space: it's a reverb heavy affair. The section we are beginning with today is heavily inspired rhythmically and texturally by a song named 'Umbra' by the Australian band Karnivool.

EXAMPLE 1

We begin simple, introducing the bridge theme. The first unusual technique here is the pinky upstroke after the left handed slapped harmonic chord. Here, the fretting hand is touching the 12th fret harmonics while the fourth finger of the picking hand performs an upstroke from behind the 12th fret on the nut side. This creates a much warmer texture than a conventional stroke. The hands will cross over several times in this passage as the theme is introduced, the finale in the fourth bar for example.
At the end of this extract you have a classic Hedges-esque example of a hammered pattern accompanied by artificial harmonics.

EXAMPLE 2

As this new bridge theme progresses, we are adding subtle percussion, the most obvious change admittedly. The thumb of the picking hand is implying a delicate half time groove on beat three of every four beat bar by striking the top of the guitar, around the area of a pickup selector on a Les Paul. We also have tapped natural harmonics (Van Halen style) on the second beat of alternating bars. The real fun comes with the lightning fast triplet run using hammer-ons and pull-offs. I included this as, compositionally, I felt the piece needed some lightning, both in the context of the tune and the album as a whole.

EXAMPLE 3

The final development comes with an enhanced percussion accompaniment. The thumb is now providing contextual accents while the 'snares' are replaced by scratches on the body of the guitar (fingernails scraping the wood). This has to be one of my favourite passages on the record.

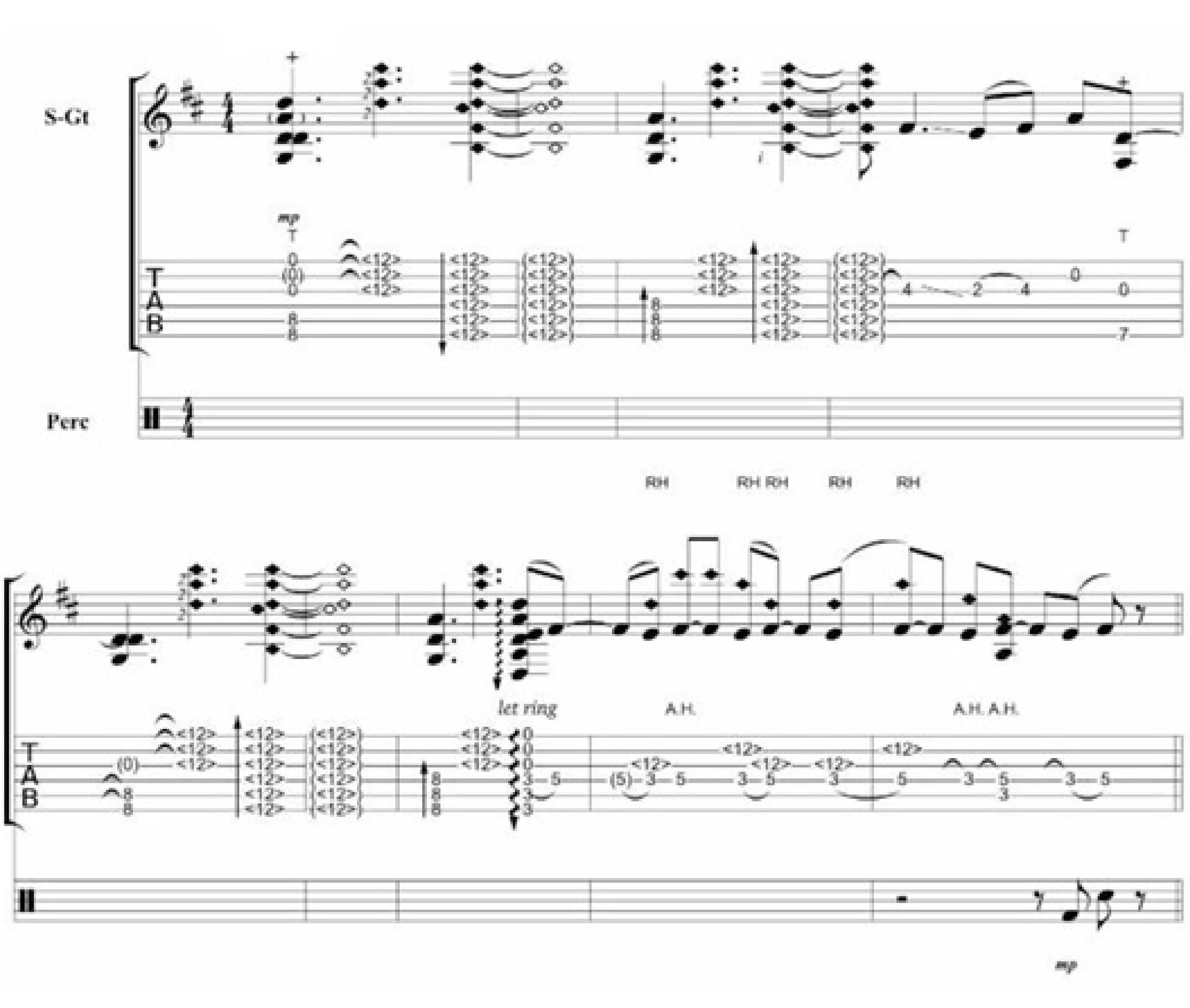
EXAMPLE 4

For any fans of Opeth's *Watershed* album reading this, the above dark and delicate transitional passage was very much inspired by songs like 'Hessian Peel', and that major resolution that the Swedes in question use so often. This element is used to bring the busy playing down to a dynamic similar to the introduction, but also to introduce a darkness we will explore in our finale...

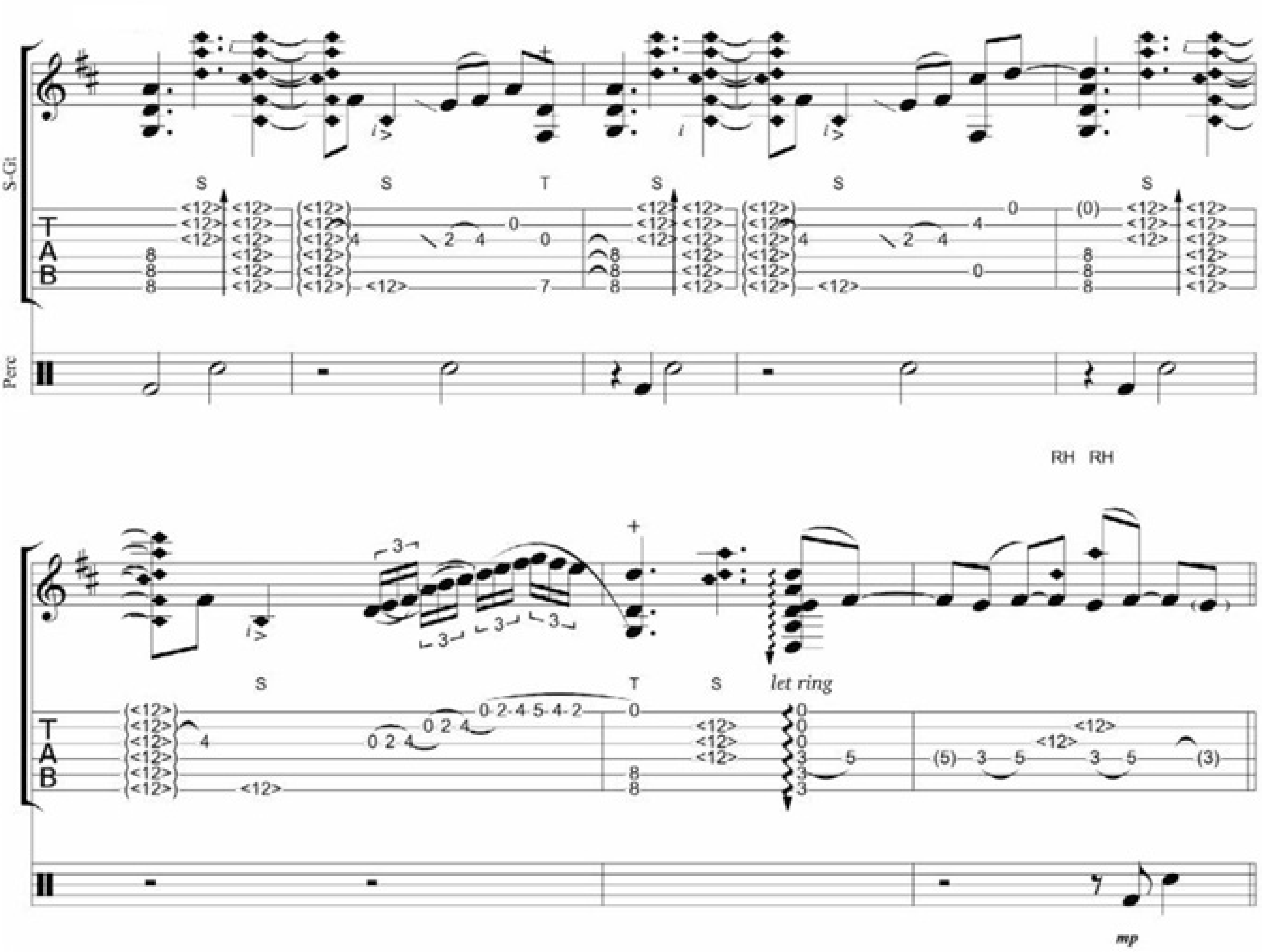
EXAMPLE 5

To conclude the piece, the very intro is referenced but with one big change. The top of the arpeggio is now a D#. Now out of context, this clash sounds horrific, truly. However this small change adds a sense of mystery and intrigue that draws the piece to a nice conclusion. Remember to let it breathe, and good luck with 'The Old Room'. ■

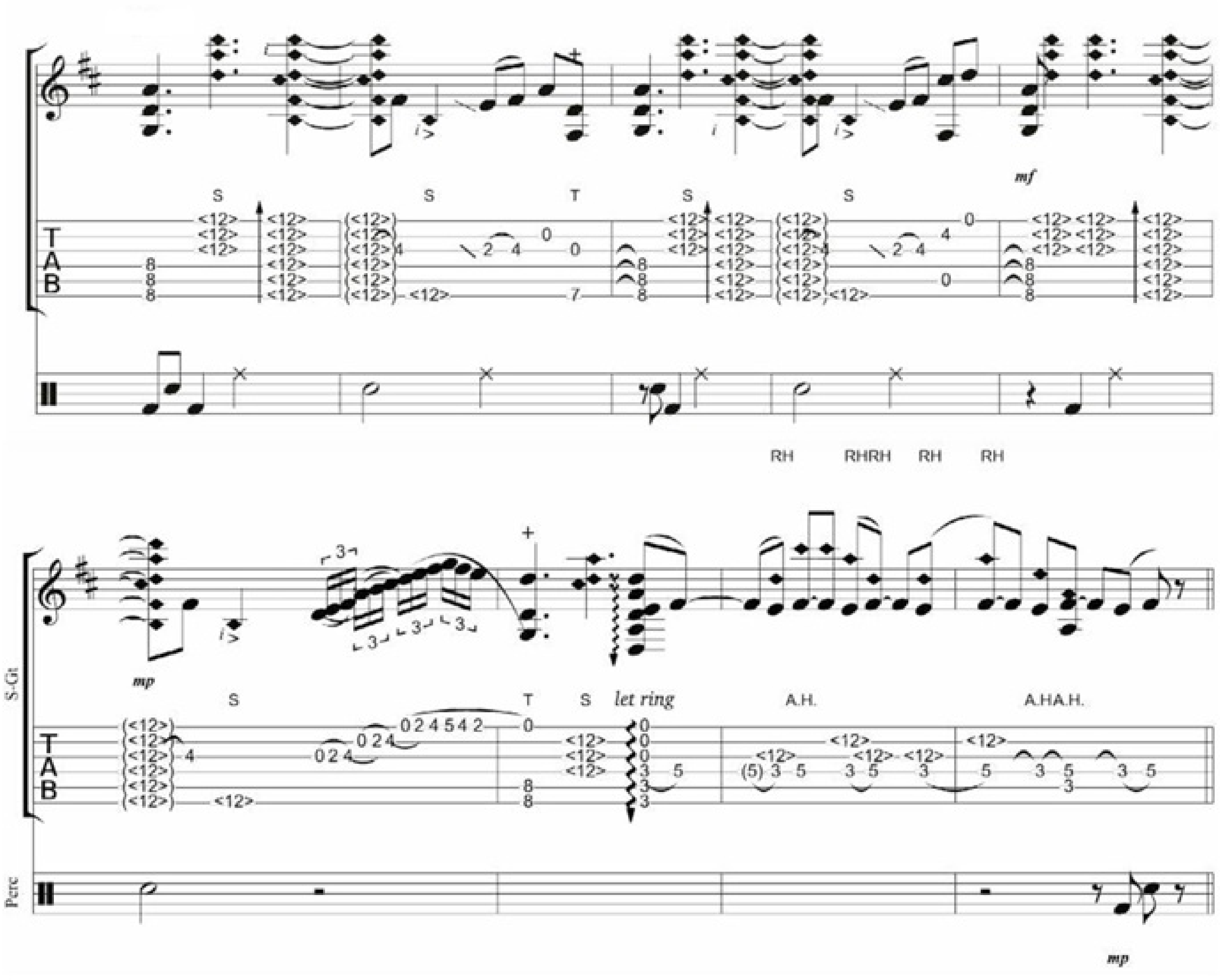
EXAMPLE 1



EXAMPLE 2



EXAMPLE 3



RAYMOND BURLEY CLASSICAL GUITARIST

'O DOLCE HARMONIA'

Burley presents a gently intricate piece by 17th century composer Sor

The piece I've chosen for this issue follows on quite nicely from my previous one, Miguel Llobet's 'El Testament d'Amelia' with its use of natural and artificial harmonics. Unlike that piece, 'O Dolce Harmonia' uses natural harmonics entirely. Although Spaniard Fernando Sor (1778-1839) is credited as the composer, it is in fact an imaginative arrangement of a piece by Mozart, 'Das Kinget so Herrlich', which appears towards the end of Act 1 in his opera *The Magic Flute*. Sor includes the piece in his op.19 set, 'Six Airs from The Magic Flute' published in 1824. It's not the first time he used the piece; his op.9 is a set of variations on the same theme and it's fair to say this is his most well-known and performed piece. Why Sor chose this melody as the basis for these compositions is not clear – as a theme it's fairly mundane.

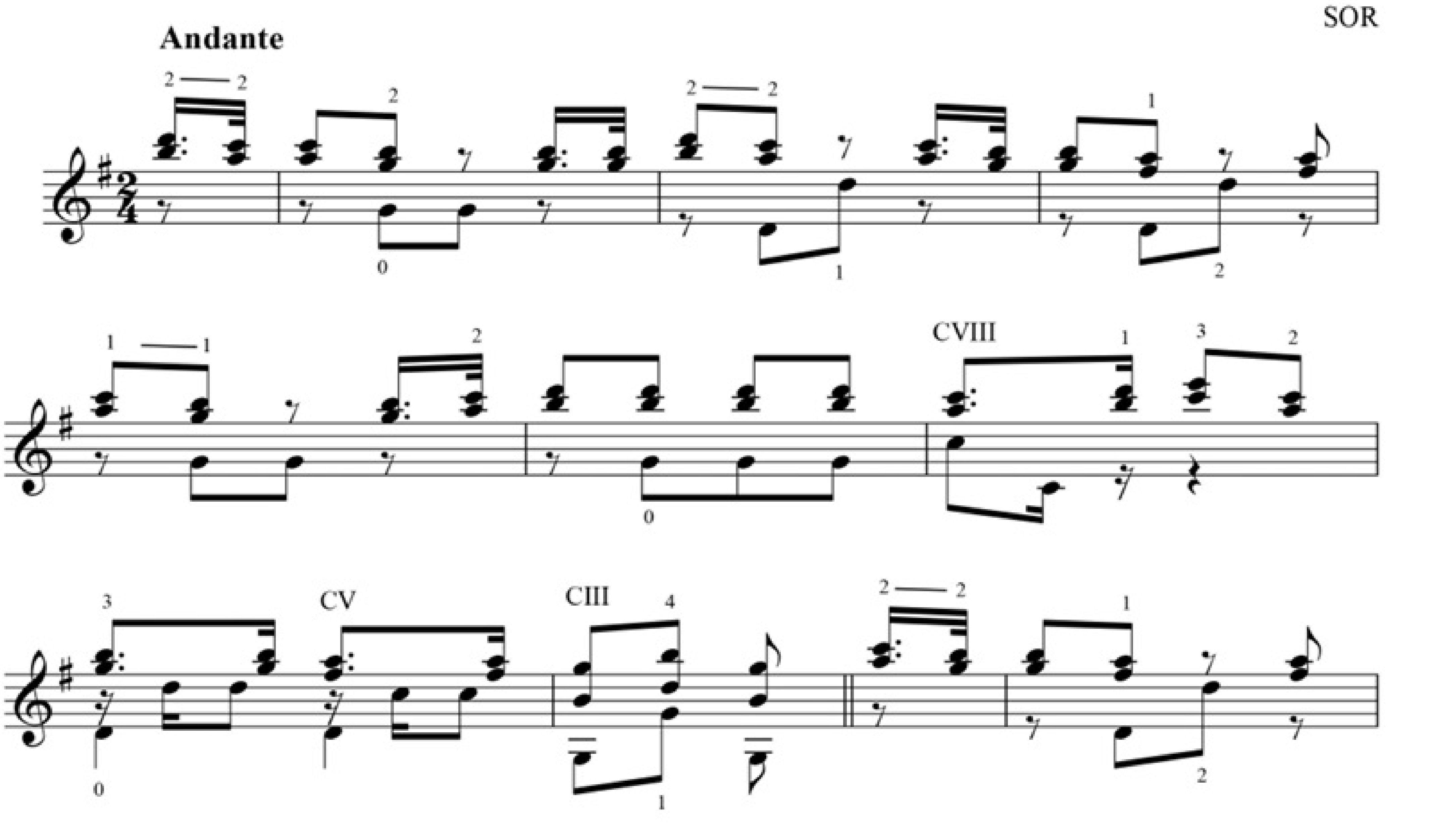
As you'll discover, 'O Dolce Harmonia' (translating as 'sweet melody') has quite basic harmonies: little more than tonic, subdominant and dominant. The first half of the piece is relatively straightforward both melodically and technically. The second half, based on the same material, is technically more intricate, with a liberal sprinkling of harmonics punctuating the melody. Natural harmonics can be found on any string at the 12th, 7th and 5th frets; 4th and 9th harmonics are also available (both producing the same pitch). Sor goes one step further by including harmonics at the 3rd fret – I've indicated these in the copy as 3+ as the harmonic point is found to the plus, or sharp, side of the fret. These may require practising separately to achieve a consistently clear sound. Also, you may find it beneficial to move your right hand slightly closer to the bridge for a clearer sound. Care must be taken to achieve consistent volume levels throughout each group; in fact this may prove to be one of the main technical problems in the entire piece – a harmonic at the 12th fret being considerably louder and more resonant than harmonics found at the higher frets. A matter of balance.

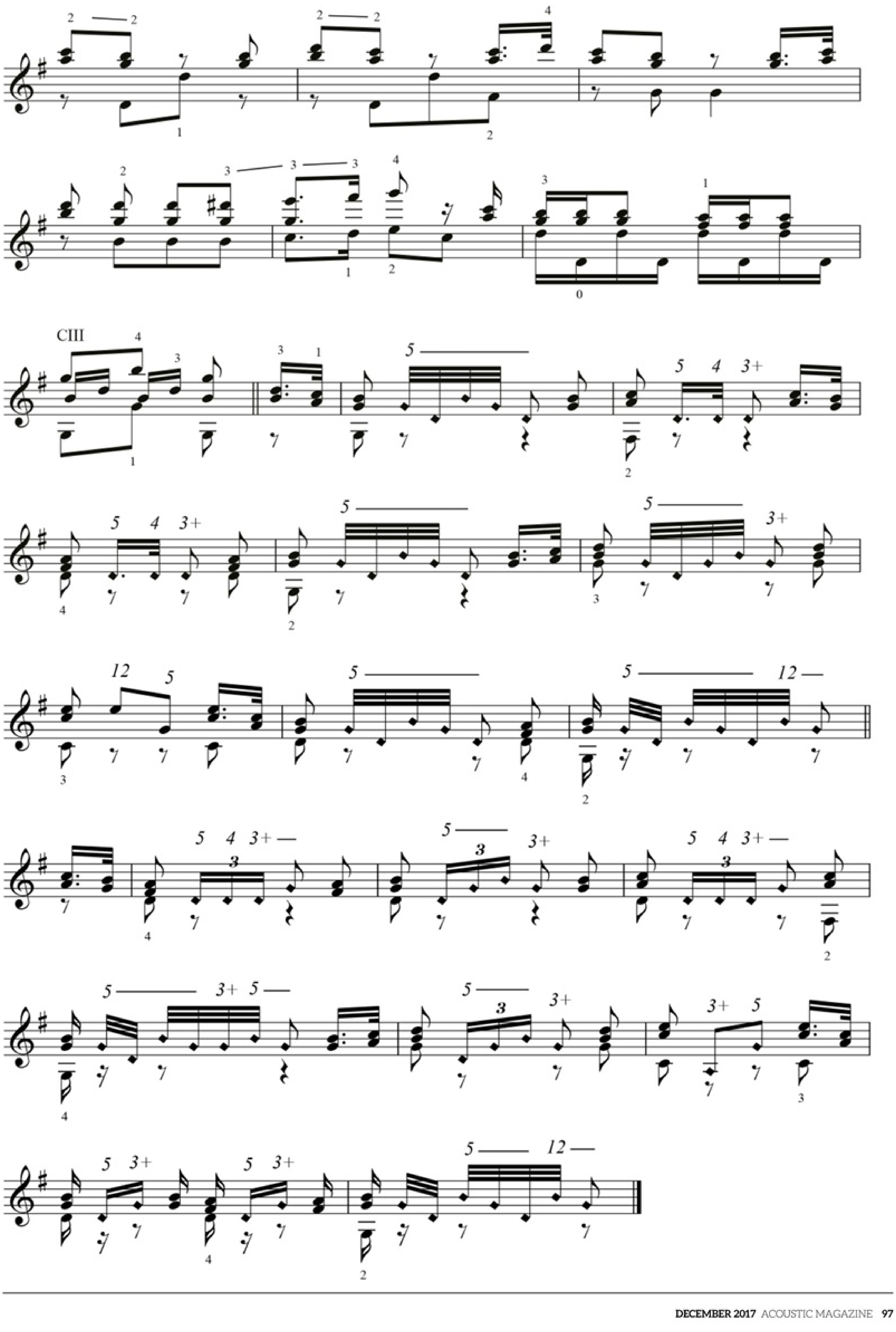
All left hand fingerings shown in the copy are mine, the original has none. It has no dynamic suggestions either.

Onto the trickier second section. Your choice of tempo is absolutely crucial if the harmonics are to be clear and (importantly) rhythmic: my recommendation is somewhere in the region of quaver = 108. Bear in mind that the harmonics are interjections and not melodic. The first set of harmonics is probably best executed with right hand fingers: i, p, m, i, p, for the second batch. I favour p, i, p.

Several years ago I recorded an entire CD of Fernando Sor's guitar music and op.19 was featured on that. The set, totalling around 10 minutes, represents an imaginative and less frequently performed item from this prolific 19th century guitar composer. ■

'O DOLCE HARMONIA'




CIII

Paco de Lucía revolutinised flamenco music and has influenced guitarists of every genre around the globe. This month, on what would have been the legend's 70th birthday, we take a look back at his life

Paco de Lucía was born on December 21, 1947, as Francisco Sánchez Gómez in Algeciras, a small city in Southern Spain's Cadiz province. He was the youngest of five children from flamenco guitarist Antonio Sánchez Pecino and Portuguese mother Luzia Gomes. His brothers include flamenco singer Pepe de Lucía and flamenco guitarist Ramón de Algeciras (now deceased). Antonio introduced his youngest son to the guitar at five-years-old and was extremely strict – forcing him to practice up to 12 hours every day. In a 2012 interview, de Lucía stated that he "learned the guitar like a child learns to speak".

Mastering the art of flamenco guitar by his 11th birthday, de Lucía made his public performance debut on Radio Algeciras in 1958. A year later, he received a special award at the Festival Concurso International Flamenco de Jerez de la Frontera. Hailed as a child prodigy, de Lucía made his first record with brother Pepe, *Los Chiquitos de Algeciras* (Kids of Algeciras) at the age of 14. He was invited to join the flamenco troupe led by dancer José Greco two years later. While on tour with Greco in New York City in 1963, a 15-year-old de Lucía met Sabicas, the first flamenco guitarist to tour the world, and Mario Escudero, both of whom became mentors and close friends. They urged him to start writing his own material.

Although he remained tied to traditional flamenco on his first two solo albums – *La Fabulosa Guitarra de Paco de Lucía* (1967) and *Fantasia Flamenca* (1969) – de Lucía pushed the boundaries of the genre further than anyone could have expected; playing a key role in the evolution of new flamenco and Latin jazz fusion from the 1970s onwards. He received acclaim for his recordings with flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla in the 1970s, recording ten albums which are considered some of the most important and influential in flamenco history.

Other collaborations included with American pianist Chick Corea and the Guitar Trio, featuring guitarists John McLaughlin, Larry Coryell, and Al DiMeola. His recordings with his sextet, which included his brothers Ramón and Pepe, include such groundbreaking masterpieces as *La Fabulosa Guitarra*, *Fantasia Flamenca*, *Fuente y Caudal*, *Almoraima*, and *Zyryab*. Yet, de Lucía did not completely forsake traditional flamenco. His 1980 album, *Interpreta a Manuel de Falla*, paid homage to the classical composer and flamenco enthusiast, while his 1987 album, *Siroco*, marked a return to pure flamenco music.

De Lucía died of a heart attack on February 25, 2014, while on holiday with his family in Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico. While playing soccer with his son on the beach, he reportedly asked his wife to take him to the hospital because he felt a "strange coolness in his throat". He was taken to a hospital in the city of Yucatán but soon after, he lost consciousness and died. His brother Pepe commented that De Lucía had quit a two-pack a day smoking habit 20 days earlier, and vowed to take up more sports activity after the death of his friend Félix Grande.

His remains were buried at a cemetery in his hometown of Algeciras, which declared two days of official mourning following the news. Paco de Lucía posthumously won the Latin Grammy Award for Album of the Year for his album *Canción Andaluza* at the 2014 awards ceremony. ■

Faith

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